

From George Eliot and Thomas Hardy to Imre Kertész and Haruki Murakami, novelists have long been inspired by Greek tragic texts and have shaped their narratives along lines informed by these classic plays. But actually retelling the story enacted in ancient tragedy, by presenting mythical theatre scripts as historical fictions set in archaic Greece, is a more recent phenomenon. The trend has coincided with the rediscovery, since the 1980s, of Greek tragedy in the performance repertoires of mainstream professional theatres. It has accelerated over the last two decades, since Christa Wolf's influential novel *Medea* (1996). Her rewriting of Euripides' evergreen tragedy by the same name tackled, in the voices of Medea and other characters in Bronze Age Corinth, the history of Wolf's tense relationship with the Communist Party of the German Democratic Republic. By giving voice to multiple witnesses on the action, this novel showed how the version of the myth staged by Euripides, in which Medea, notoriously, murders her own young sons, might have arisen from rumours maliciously spread against a perceived 'enemy of the people' by cynical spin-doctors in order to frame her

Until recently, the most successful English-language novel recasting a Greek tragedy was Barry Unsworth's dazzling *Songs of the Kings* (2002). Unsworth skilfully retold the terrible story of the human sacrifice of a princess in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, implying that myths may have been doctored in antiquity by bards and royal propagandists. But now Colm Tóibín, a giant amongst storytellers, has thrown down the gauntlet with his latest novel, *House of Names*. Like Unsworth's, it is based on the myth of the house of Atreus, but this time it uses the version told in Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*. It is a masterpiece.

It seems in hindsight inevitable that Tóibín would one day rewrite a Greek tragedy, since it is a genre obsessed with inter-generational strife. From Tóibín's pen we have come accustomed to rites-of-passage novels about young adults asserting their independence while acknowledging their ancestral roots, as in *Brooklyn* (2009). He is a searing evoker of familial relationships, especially in bereaved Irish families, as in *The Heather Blazing* (1992) and *Nora*

Webster (2014). His painful dissection of relationships between female parents and male offspring came under the microscope in his short story collection *Mothers and Sons* (2006). He has already written a novel set in an ancient Mediterranean context, *The Testament of Mary* (2012), in which Jesus' mourning mother rails against her plight in a style Tóibín has acknowledged was inspired by the rhetoric of the angriest heroines of Greek tragedy, especially Medea. *The House of Names* finally moves us directly to archaic Greece, but it fuses all these hallmarks of his previous work in a magnificent evocation of a troubled community undergoing two decades of reciprocal atrocity. The period is co-extensive with the maturation of the central character, Orestes, from early childhood. He experiences his sister Iphigenia being sacrificed by his father Agamemnon, and eventually responds to his mother Clytemnestra's retributive killing of Agamemnon by murdering her himself.

Tóibín's ancient Greece, riven by brutal feuds, owes something to his background in Ireland during the Troubles and his grandfather's involvement with the IRA. The vendetta-rich *Oresteia* has previously attracted several of his compatriots: it was used to address the Irish situation in Tom Murphy's play *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's drama *In the Border Country* for Channel 4 television (1991), Seamus Heaney's 1996 poetry collection *The Spirit Level*, and Marina Carr's tragedy *Ariel* (2002). But Tóibín's ancient Argos is more sinister still. Children disappear without trace, guards are found murdered in palace corridors, and entire families massacred in local farmhouses. Surreptitious sexual encounters and whispered interchanges take place continuously. Prisoners languish in secret underground cells built into the citadel's foundations; chain-gangs of slaves are suddenly transported from one part of the Peloponnese to another. Although fleeting alliances are formed in order to wreak revenge or secure temporary power, nobody can trust anyone else for long, and a raised eyebrow or a downward glance can indicate that an outrage has been perpetrated, as it were, 'offstage'. For Tóibín has found fruitful ways to exploit the theatrical nature of the text he is

recasting. The metaphor of role-playing underpins much of his psychological portrait-painting. Spies and messengers arrive with grim news from far away. Like the ancient trilogy on which it is based, the action takes place in a small number of identifiable locations—the royal palace, the coastal sanctuary where Iphigenia died, a remote prison camp and the old woman's farmhouse where Orestes grew up after being kidnapped. The potential hazard of a sprawling time frame is avoided by deft condensation of the story into a handful of key sequences; carefully insinuated flashbacks and memories remind us that these vengeance killings are rooted in a tradition of fratricide now generations old.

At the heart of the novel, Orestes is in hiding in the farmhouse. With an accidentally acquired 'family' consisting of the old woman and two other boys, he is enjoying the nearest approximation to a happy household he will ever experience. In this episode of temporary calm, twin narratives are embedded side-by-side. They both feature swans and represent what Tóibín suggests is an affinity between Greek and Irish legend. The first is the story of Helen of Troy. There are no proper names provided, but the identities, imprinted on Irish consciousness forever by Yeats' exquisite poem 'Leda and the Swan' (1923), are unmistakable: it is the tale of 'the most beautiful girl that anyone had ever seen', the product of the mating between a god disguised as a swan and a mortal woman. She had two doomed brothers (which readers recognise as Castor and Pollux) and a sister (Clytemnestra); her beauty caused the Trojan War, which has left Greece in its current miserable state, bereft of a generation of its men. The second tale, told by Orestes' sickly friend Mitros, is the old Irish legend *The Children of Lir*, in which the wicked stepmother of Lir's four youngsters turns them into swans. They must undergo 900 years of exile before they can escape her spell.

Where the Greek myth ends in misery, the Irish story holds out the possibility of redemption for the cygnets in remote posterity. Tóibín ends his novel with Orestes and Electra, although heavily scarred by all that has befallen them and all that they have done, facing a new

future with some promise of moderate stability and modest happiness. The fusion of the Greek and Irish traditions is crystallised in the figure of Clytemnestra, who returns in the penultimate chapter to haunt Orestes, her murderer: in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* Clytemnestra's ghost does briefly appear, but Tóibín's disembodied, restless dead matriarch takes just as much inspiration from Aoife, the callous stepmother in the Irish saga, punished by being transformed into an air demon for eternity.

Another element of tragic theatre which Tóibín retains is the use of direct speech for Clytemnestra and Electra, who tell their bleak tales of alienation, hatred and revenge in bald first-person sentences which sometimes sound like transcripts of police interviews. Although Tóibín is careful to show how their personalities have been warped by helplessness in the face of male domination, both mother and daughter come over as obnoxious, vicious and vindictive. The sequences focussing on Orestes, on the other hand, are in the third person; yet, paradoxically, we become much more intimate with him than with his womenfolk, and far more sympathetic towards him. In common with several of Tóibín's leading men, he grows up sensing that he is what we now call 'gay'; he is too gentle, hesitant and naïve to live up to the expectations others have of him in terms of reprisals for his father's death and seizure of the Argive throne. He is consistently out-manoeuvred by his mother and her lover Aegisthus, and subsequently struggles to decode the motives of his quicker-witted sister and his best friend, the commoner but alpha-male Leander, for whom he harbours an unrequited romantic passion. But the reader is deeply engaged with Orestes' consciousness, and the finale of the novel, which departs decisively from the conclusion of the Aeschylean trilogy, is a cliff-hanger.

If Tóibín's female characters are less congenial than his Orestes, Natalie Haynes puts innocent women's perspectives on family trauma at the centre of her radar. In *The Children of Jocasta* she chooses the story of the Theban royal household, featuring Oedipus, son of Laius, son/husband of Jocasta, and father/brother of four children including Antigone: the novel draws

on all three tragedies by Sophocles dealing with this family, from the viewpoint of the two women often overlooked in the mythical tradition, Jocasta and Ismene. What interests Haynes is the subjectivity of very young women (indeed, teenagers scarcely of childbearing age) in the type of society in which Greek tragedy was set. It was not just patriarchal, but emphatically *patrilocal*, in that women moved households on marriage while men remained, more emotionally secure, in the homes where they had been born. Haynes' excellent previous novel, *The Amber Fury* (2014), also used Greek tragedy to explore the psychology of a damaged adolescent girl, but as a foil in a thriller set in contemporary Britain; here she asks how Bronze Age maidens would cope with the shocking deprivations to which they were routinely subject. Jocasta was married off to an ageing tyrant with no interest in her, and left to fend for herself in royal court blighted by feuds between rival factions. Jocasta's daughter Ismene discovered that she was the offspring of incest, lost both her parents and both her brothers, feared losing her one remaining sister, and was the victim of barbarous assault. Haynes interweaves their stories, Jocasta's told in the third person and Ismene's in the first, building up to an exciting climax and a surprising, decidedly feminist conclusion. She is tremendous at handling a detective-style plot stretching six decades across the history of Thebes. And as a trained classicist, there is, in her cinematic evocations of Thebes, plenty of well-researched, authentic colour, reminiscent of the exquisite novels set in ancient Greece by Mary Renault: readers from their teens onwards interested in classical civilisation will find fascinating accounts of rituals, cult names of the gods, furniture, clothing, food, writing materials and architecture.

Both Tóibín and Haynes are masters of their trade, crafting perfectly shaped sentences and creating believable characters who speak and think in delicately nuanced language. They both succeed in breathing warm life into the individuals enacting the plots of some of our oldest Mediterranean stories and showing how basic human relationships and emotions have changed remarkably little. This is sadly not the case with David Vann's *Bright Air Black*, which purports

to retell the story of Medea from her elopement with the Greek Argonauts from her father's Black Sea kingdom to the moment, years later, when her sons by Jason meet their bloody death in Corinth. The myth is stirring stuff. A straightforward narrativisation could make for an electrifying read, especially if it reproduced the delicacy of Euripides' psychological dissection of Medea as a woman too clever for her allotted role in society and of the prevaricating, hypocritical, opportunistic Jason. But Vann is no Euripides. His Medea has an intrusive obsession with Egyptian religion which is never explained. The characters are crudely drawn and the emotional register of unrelieved fortissimo melodrama makes the moments of climactic violence laughable. Vann's portentous, idiosyncratic style is so irritating that I found it hard to complete the book: when he uses main verbs at all, which is with distressing infrequency, they are in a pretentious present tense. His default technique is to pile up torrid descriptive details until the point of the episode is altogether buried from view. The novel by either Tóibín or Haynes would make excellent Mediterranean holiday reading material; their Argive and Theban tales, indeed, complement each other in fascinating ways if read sequentially. But you are well advised to bypass *Bright Air Black* altogether.