

BRIAN FRIEL'S GREEK TRAGEDY: NARRATIVE, DRAMA, AND FATE IN *LIVING QUARTERS*

Introduction

Brian Friel adds the words 'after Hippolytus' to the title of *Living Quarters* (1977), presumably with reference to Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428 BC). In *Hippolytus*, Hippolytus rejects Aphrodite, goddess of love, and is the favourite of her rival Artemis. Aphrodite punishes Hippolytus by causing his stepmother Phaedra to fall in love with him. He repudiates Phaedra's advances, and she retaliates by denouncing him to her husband Theseus (Hippolytus' father) for attempted rape. Phaedra kills herself, and Theseus causes Hippolytus' death. *Living Quarters* has a similar triangle of father, son, and stepmother, but Friel develops the story in a different way. Ben (the Hippolytus figure) actually does have an affair with Anna (the Phaedra figure). Frank (the Theseus figure) is told the truth about this affair by Anna. He kills himself, Anna and Ben survive.

The three main characters

There are two further ways in which Friel follows Euripides. The first is in his understanding of the three main characters. Frank, like Theseus, is a man of action, a military man who is frequently absent from home. Both men are virile and passionate, and contrast strongly in these respects with their sons. Frank is somewhat inattentive to Anna's thoughts and feelings, a fault of character subtly illustrated by the following exchange:

HELEN: (*To ANNA*) He's being transferred, isn't he?

FRANK: Yes, he's being transferred (p. 232).¹

The problem with Theseus is mainly one of physical absence at the crucial time, but it could be argued that his behaviour in the play also evinces failure to understand his wife and son. Theseus does not actually kill himself, as Frank does, but Phaedra's death prompts him to suicidal despair: 'Beneath the earth, I wish I might go to dwell in the gloom beneath the earth, sharing my sorrowful home, a dead man, with the

¹*Living Quarters* is cited from Brian Friel, *Plays One* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996).

darkness, now that the joy of your company has been taken from me'.² Anna is described in the *dramatis personae* as 'mature, intelligent, passionate', and this description could apply equally to Euripides' Phaedra. Anna has to endure the discomfort and tedium of 'a remote and run-down army camp in the wilds of County Donegal' (p. 178; cf. pp. 189, 195). Phaedra lives in exile at Trozen just across the Saronic gulf from Athens, and is evidently idle and bored. Anna could have resolved to live with her secret (p. 207), as Phaedra tries to conceal her passion for Hippolytus, but both reveal their love with fatal results.

Hippolytus is an aristocratic youth who rejects sex and devotes himself to hunting. This does not sound very like Ben, but closer inspection reveals some unexpected similarities. Euripides' Hippolytus can be interpreted in terms of the *ephebeia*, a transitional stage for the Athenian male between childhood and adulthood (approximately between the ages of 18 and 20). There is evidence for the *ephebeia* as a formal institution by the end of the fourth century, and something comparable may well have existed earlier.³ Such rites of passage articulate the process by which a young man leaves behind the asexual world of childhood and dependence on his mother, and takes on the political and social responsibilities of adulthood. 'This change is dramatised in a wide variety of ways, but usually involves a period of withdrawal from the community to a "marginal" world...These marginal periods can be characterised by an inversion of normality or by a mixture of the normal and the abnormal'.⁴ Hippolytus spends most of his time out in the wilds hunting, prefers sport to politics, and refuses to get married and have children. Such behaviour may be appropriate for an ephebe, but seems to have been adopted by him as a permanent

²Euripides, *Hippolytus*, lines 836–8, cited from *Alcestis and Other Plays*, translated by John Davie (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 151.

³ See Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia*, ch. 42. Cf. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'The black hunter and the origin of the Athenian *ephebeia*', in *The Black Hunter* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 106–28 (a revised version of an article which first appeared in 1968).

⁴A.M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 46. Cf. generally Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage* (Paris, 1909; Eng. tr. as *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

way of life. ‘Hippolytus ... cannot successfully negotiate the passage between youth and man, wild and civilized’.⁵ Ben (now aged twenty four) dropped out of UCD in his first year, lives in a caravan by the sea, disappears periodically but never goes very far, has no proper job, and is not married (pp. 186–7, 205, 209–10). He loiters on the margins of adult life. Miriam describes him as ‘a spoiled mother’s boy’ (p. 187), and he could not demonstrate failure to break away from the parental home more clearly than by having an affair with his stepmother. Hippolytus and Ben both have fractured relationships with their fathers. Theseus has a deep-seated suspicion of his son’s eccentric lifestyle, which clearly predisposes him to believe Phaedra’s false accusation. Frank’s relationship with Ben is no more satisfactory:

BEN: The day she died I called him a murderer.

HELEN: Six years have passed.

BEN: And he hit me – don’t you remember? – he hit me!

HELEN: That’s all over.

BEN: Years, years of hostility (p. 212).

Motifs from Greek tragedy

Friel’s allusion to Euripides signals a second, less specific, debt. *Living Quarters* is a modern Irish version of a Greek tragedy, and it evokes a range of tragic motifs whose Greek originals are not confined to *Hippolytus*. The doomed Butler family in which the parents destroy their own lives and those of their children resembles such notoriously dysfunctional households as those of Agamemnon and Oedipus. Friel stresses the utter destruction and dispersal of Frank’s family and household after his death (p. 245), recalling such plays as Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and *Bacchae*. The participants in the play-within-a-play experience what seems intended as an

⁵Charles Segal, ‘Pentheus and Hippolytus on the couch and on the grid’, in *Interpreting Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 268–93, at p. 280.

Aristotelian catharsis, as Friel stresses the ‘sense of relief’ and ‘serenity’ which follow their enactment of the tragedy (p. 242).⁶

Frank’s blithe confidence in his happiness and success is at its greatest immediately before the catastrophe. He speaks of his ‘superabundance’ of joy (p. 197), Helen has never seen him so elated (p. 235), and he complains to Sir that his life has been destroyed at its moment of greatest fulfilment (pp. 240–1). The idea of the envy (*phthonos*) of the gods was strongly present in Greek culture, and is memorably illustrated by Herodotus’ story of the gods’ punishment of Croesus for supposing himself to be the happiest of men.⁷ Frank twice uses the word ‘spiteful’ (pp. 240–1) to describe his fate, vividly evoking the Greek notion of envious and malicious gods.

Friel also exploits dramatic irony, the tragic (or comic) effect of a character knowing significantly less about his own situation than is known by other characters in the play or by the audience. Everyone in Ballybeg apart from Frank himself knows that he has been cuckolded by his son (pp. 235, 238). The classic example of tragic irony is Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, although Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is more directly similar to *Living Quarters* in that a triumphant soldier returns home in ignorance of the fact that his wife has taken a lover and intends to kill him.

Finally, and most importantly, there is the character of Sir. He fulfils the role of the Greek chorus, in that he introduces new characters and comments on the action from a somewhat detached standpoint. Furthermore, the ledger from which he reads seems, at least on one level, to represent fate. The interrelation of free will and predetermination, which is the main theme of *Living Quarters*, is also a preoccupation of Greek tragedy. The most remarkable achievement of the play is to suggest the workings of fate in a modern Irish context in which it has no accepted metaphysical reality.

⁶Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 6. The meaning of ‘catharsis’ in Aristotle has been much debated. There is a lucid and authoritative discussion in Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1986), pp. 184–201.

⁷Herodotus, Book 1, chh. 30–45. Cf. the story of Polycrates’ ring (Book 3, chh. 39–43).

Three levels

Sir's ledger seems to have three levels of meaning. On one level, it has been conceived 'in their imagination' by those involved as 'a complete and detailed record of everything that was said and done that day' (p. 177). The play is an imaginary reconstruction of the events by the characters, and the ledger is the record against which the accuracy of that reconstruction can be checked. Charlie's attempts to insinuate himself into the action imply that he wants to tell the story in such a way as to include himself in events at which he was not actually present (pp. 181, 208–9). There is no support in the play for the view that Sir's account is in some way defective. 'He allows only one version of the past, that which faithfully reflects the chronological order of events. All that is latent, all that is excluded from the dominant discourse...does not count with him. He is the champion of rational empiricism and common sense'.⁸ This view is refuted by the explicit emphasis on the accuracy of his knowledge and interpretation at the beginning and end of the play (pp. 177–8, 243). Helen challenges his accuracy on one point (pp. 188–9), but he is able to correct her memory on the basis of his knowledge of the feelings of the other two sisters. Tom criticizes 'that corrupt ledger', but only because it refutes his self-indulgent fancy that he attempted to save Frank's life, when in fact he was too drunk to do anything (pp. 241–2). The long sequence which begins Act II (pp. 216–27) is an inaccurate version of events, partly reflecting wishful thinking, and only proceeds because Sir is not present. When he finally appears, the Butlers need no further prompting to return to the version in the ledger, and there is no question of his needing to coerce them. The version in the ledger is implicitly accepted as authoritative.

The play is preoccupied with the process of turning events into (more or less accurate) stories. Storytelling is a Butler characteristic which is repeatedly illustrated, and from this point of view the play is an expression of their compulsive dwelling on the past, their creation of 'the Butler lore' (pp. 224–5). They create a family mythology which unites them as a group. Meaning and consolation can be found in intrinsically distressing events, such as Ben's rescue from the old coastguard station (pp. 210–11) or his near-poisoning by the contents of Tom's flask (pp. 223–5). Frank comforted the wounded men at Hari with accounts of Anna (p. 222). Contrast Tom's

⁸Elmer Andrews, *The Art of Brian Friel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 140–1.

‘silly stories’ (p. 221), fatuous and mendacious anecdotes which contribute no more than superficial cheerfulness.

We hear of a variety of other methods of committing events to the record, usually emphasizing their inaccuracy. There are the ‘tales to be told for years to come’ in Ballybeg (p. 184), the ludicrous newspaper reports (pp. 193, 216, 220), Frank’s parodic after-dinner speech (p. 194), the Taoiseach’s eulogy (p. 233), the citation on the parchment (pp. 236–7), the official lie that Frank did not commit suicide (p. 243), Miriam’s account to her children of their grandfather’s death (p. 244). Frank is obliged to submit a report of his exploit to GHQ, and this is characteristically all that he offers to Helen when she asks him to tell her ‘exactly what happened’ (p. 195). Even the camera lies. When Tom takes his group photograph, Helen produces the appearance of a smile by uttering the words *noblesse oblige* (p. 201). These words are actually associated in her mind with her mother’s tirade about Gerry Kelly: ‘You can’t marry him, you little vixen! *Noblesse oblige*! D’you hear – *noblesse oblige*!’ (p. 183).

On another level, Sir is a director supervising a rehearsal, and the ledger is the script. Tom approaches him like an actor wanting ‘something to hang the cap on’ (p. 179) in playing his part, and is offered some unflattering comments from the ledger which correspond closely to Friel’s own description in the *dramatis personae*. He interrupts a scene between Helen and Ben with ironic words of praise (pp. 205–6), organizes the performers (pp. 227–8), gives instructions for the removal of the props at the end of the play (pp. 245–6). This relationship between Sir and the members of the Butler family resembles that between the Director and the Characters in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). The members of the Butler family are, on this level, dramatic characters who are allotted a degree of autonomy to discuss their roles with the director. Sir controls what the audience sees as well as what the characters do within the fictive world of the play. He thus concludes Act I with the words ‘We’ll resume again in approximately – what? – fifteen minutes’ (p. 215).⁹

⁹There are valuable observations on Pirandello and Friel in Christopher Murray, ‘Pirandello and Brian Friel: some affinities’, in John C. Barnes & Stefano Milioto (edd.), *Le due trilogie pirandelliane* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1992), pp. 207–15.

Sir's role occasionally seems more like that of the author, who selects from the totality of events recorded in the ledger those which are to be represented in the play. He thus remarks in his opening speech 'what I would like to do is organize those recollections for you, impose a structure on them, just to give them a form of sorts' (p. 178). He can omit the irrelevant and the trivial to an extent that goes beyond the power of a director. The ledger is a datum, which Sir can interpret but from which he cannot depart in any significant way. Pirandello was certainly obsessed by the idea that characters impose themselves on the dramatist, and Friel may be suggesting something similar. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* deals not only with the relationship between characters and the actors who impersonate them, but also that between characters and the author. Friel does no more than hint at such ideas in *Living Quarters*.¹⁰

Finally, on a third level, what is written in the ledger is fate. The ledger cannot entirely be reduced to a retrospective record conceived 'out of some deep psychic necessity' (p. 177) by the surviving participants, the first level of meaning discussed above, and some passages have no meaning in those terms. When Frank makes his protest, he is protesting about what actually happened to him, not merely about how the story is told (pp. 240–1). There are parallels in Euripides for such protests against fate, the closest perhaps being the dialogue between Cadmus and Dionysus at the end of *Bacchae*:

CADMUS: Have mercy on us, Dionysus. We have sinned.

DIONYSUS: You know too late. You did not know me when you should.

CADMUS: We acknowledge this; but your revenge is merciless.

DIONYSUS: And rightly; I am a god, and you insulted me.

CADMUS: Gods should not be like mortals in vindictiveness.

¹⁰The Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) is more a narrator than a director or an author. There is a only hint of something more complex in Act III, when the dead Emily pleads with him to be allowed to revisit a day from her life.

DIONYSUS: All this my father Zeus ordained from the
beginning.¹¹

Sir hints at the ledger's role as fate when he indicates the Butler house, where 'our story is set, as they say – as if it were a feast laid out for consumption or a trap waiting to spring' (p. 177). Compare the famous passage in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1942), where the Chorus comments: 'The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself. That is what is so convenient in tragedy...The machine is in perfect order; it has been oiled ever since time began, and it runs without friction'.¹²

Friel's conception of fate is partly a matter of showing in entirely secular terms how much of what does happen must happen, and especially how individuals are confined in their characters and roles. Miriam, for example, is happily absorbed in a domestic routine which minutely determines her actions (e. g. pp. 183–4). Anna cannot keep her thoughts to herself: 'Anything she thinks – whatever comes into her head – straight out – it must come straight out – just like that' (p. 196). Frank himself has devoted his adult life to the rigidly structured life of the armed forces, where he has little control over where he lives or what he does, and where he is habituated to respond in predictable ways. He thus sees the crisis in his life in military terms: 'I did what I had to do. There was no alternative for me. None. What I had to do was absolutely clear-cut. There was never any doubt in my mind' (p. 207). The very title of the play indicates that the environment in which he lives has been allotted to him by a superior authority. Tom is the prisoner of a role which he has himself chosen, but from which he cannot escape. This point is developed on a comparatively comic level in the running gag of whether he will get drunk on Frank's big day. This is portrayed as a conflict between the 'powers that be' (p. 200), represented by Sir (pp. 198, 208), and Tom's capacity to 'confound' them. He has a repertoire of clichéd behaviour designed to elicit stock responses (e.g. his compliment to Helen, p. 199), but vainly insists on a Christian view that 'our options are *always* open' (p. 208). His problem is that he has some understanding of what is happening, but is powerless to do anything about it. Greek tragedy has several priest-figures of this type, including Tiresias (e.g.

¹¹Euripides, *Bacchae*, lines 1344–9, cited from *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, translated by Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 243. Cf. *Hippolytus*, lines 114–20, 1328–34; *Electra*, lines 1292–1341.

¹²Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*, tr. Lewis Galantière (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 34.

in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*), Amphiaraus (in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*), and Cassandra (in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*).

The power of *Living Quarters* derives above all from the more radical suggestion that everything is fated, even those choices which seem to be most free. Sir remarks that 'many different conclusions would have been possible if certain things had been said or done or left unsaid and undone' (p. 206), and he expresses this idea in a dialogue with Helen:

SIR: You could leave now.

HELEN: No. I'll see it through (p. 183).

Helen is less obviously shackled by constraints of circumstance or character than any of the others except Anna, and she has a strong sense of her freedom to choose:

BEN: (*Quiet, urgent*) I've got to tell you, Helen.

HELEN: You've 'got to' nothing (p. 214).

Helen may feel that she is making a free choice, but Sir has the ledger on his knee which (already) records that she will not leave. Friel implies that even at moments of apparently greatest freedom the outcome is already written. This is underlined by the following exchange (p. 207):

SIR: Oh, there were many, many options still open at this stage.

TOM: I agree completely. (*TOM is ignored.*)

Tom has a Christian belief in free will which is shown to misguided, and the implication here is that Sir is tantalizing the characters with an illusion of choice. Greek fate triumphs over Christian free will.

Anna tries to confess before the ledger says that she should do so, and her attempt comes to nothing (pp. 201–3). This can of course be interpreted as a retrospective attempt to rewrite of the story, which can have no effect because it never happened, but the power of the sequence derives more from the sense that she is struggling against fate at the time of the actual events. The relevant Greek background is not in tragedy but in Homer's *Iliad*. Zeus contemplates saving Hector from his fated death, and is rebuked by his daughter Athena: 'Father, master of the bright lightning and the dark clouds, what is this you are saying? Do you intend to take a man who is mortal and long ago doomed by fate, and release him from grim

death? Do it then – but we other gods will not all approve you’.¹³ Homer teases the reader with the idea that it might be possible for something to be fated but still not happen.

Much of the fascination of *Living Quarters* derives from Friel’s masterly interweaving of the three levels of meaning of Sir and his ledger. There are times when all three levels are relevant, while at other times the focus is on one to the exclusion of the other two. On one level, Tom’s drunkenness is a motif in the memories of the Butler family. Secondly, it is a stock feature of his role as a dramatic character, which an actor might find constricting or degrading—he is ‘a cliché, a stereotype’ (p. 180). Thirdly, drunkenness is compulsive behaviour from which he (as a person within the fiction) tries vainly to escape. He is a Pirandellian character (*personaggio*) who is doomed endlessly to repeat his hackneyed role as drunkard and hanger-on, but must suffer this fate as a person. There is an important distinction to be made here between *Living Quarters* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Pirandello insists on the absolute difference between characters and persons. Characters are fixed immutably in their roles and stories, while persons are fluid and transient. Friel erases this distinction between characters and persons, and emphasizes the similarities between them.

Anna

Anna has the most complex relationship with Sir, and asserts herself against him more than anyone else in the play. Her unique status is marked in various ways. Sir remarks near the end: ‘I never introduced you! You’re the only person who wasn’t introduced’ (p. 243). There is a relevant entry in the ledger, but she refuses to allow Sir to read it. She is the only one to eavesdrop on Sir’s introduction of another person, as a silent presence during his conversation with Tom (pp. 179–81), and she argumentatively reminds him of a phrase which he used there (p. 206). She makes the most explicit and determined attempt to rebel against him, when she tries prematurely

¹³Homer, *Iliad* 22.178–81, cited from the translation by Martin Hammond (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 364. Homer elsewhere toys with the idea that something might have happened ‘beyond fate’, although of course it never does (e.g. *Iliad* 2.155; 16.440–61; 20.30; 21.517).

to tell Frank about her affair (pp. 201–3). Finally, she questions him at the very end of the play about what else the ledger has to say about her (p. 246). All this adds up to a consistent portrayal of someone who is less easily defined and controlled than anyone else in the play. She is at the opposite extreme from Miriam, who is happily embedded in her role and therefore has only one fleeting exchange with Sir (p. 228).

On the first level, Anna's recalcitrance expresses the failure of her association with the Butler family. This is repeatedly illustrated, nowhere more clearly than in her failure to break into the happy scene of Tom's photograph (pp. 201–3). On the second level, Anna is a Pirandellian character (*personaggio*) who cannot find a satisfactory role and is forever arguing with the director. She also has a difficult relationship with the author, in that her motivation seems unresolved and she fits badly into the provincial domestic comedy of the Butler story. This obscurity in Anna's motivation could be regarded as a weakness in the play, but is really her essential feature and one of the play's most subtle achievements. She inevitably remains unsatisfied at the end, when everyone else has fulfilled their role in the story for good or ill. There is nothing more in the ledger because she has no existence outside the play even though she can find no home within it. Finally, on the third level, she does more than anyone else to question her fate and assert her freedom. This should not be taken to imply that she actually attains the freedom which she desires, as can be seen from the play's enigmatic conclusion. She asks Sir to continue reading from the ledger, but all he can offer is blank pages (p. 246). There remains a lingering dissatisfaction, and Friel goes out of his way to stress the superficiality and lack of commitment of her life in America. He avoids any suggestion of a bright new start, and the final impression is of emptiness rather than of freedom.

Conclusion

The play is much concerned with the recording of events and the making of stories, and the events of the day of Frank's death are thus seen in terms of the collective memory of the members of his family. Secondly, attention is drawn to the play itself as a work of fiction which organizes a variety of events and characters into a coherent story. Finally, Friel suggests a relationship between dramatic logic and the compulsion of fate. The order imposed by the dramatist on the events of the play is comparable both to the order imposed by individuals on their memories and to the

order imposed by fate on the actions themselves. Fate is a concept where Friel inevitably lacks the metaphysical dimension which was available to the Greeks, and needs to insinuate the concept more obliquely. He exploits the play's double time-frame to create the illusion of events existing outside time. They can repeatedly be recreated in memory afterwards, but also seem as if they existed before they actually happened. The only difference is the direction from which the events are viewed. This is demonstrated by the *coup de théâtre* when, just before the fatal shot, Tina enters too soon and is silenced by Sir (p. 242). On the first level, this is a mistake in telling the story; on the second level, it is an actress mistiming her entrance; on the third level, the implication is that Tina's anguished cry 'Daddy-Daddy-Daddy-Daddy!' already existed before Frank has shot himself. The events are there, waiting to happen. The most remarkable feature of the play is the way in which Friel has re-imagined the concept of fate and made it convincing in contemporary terms, and this is another example of the thoroughness and insight with which he has crafted his own Greek tragedy.¹⁴

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¹⁴I am grateful to the editor for prompting me to think harder about the character of Anna.