

*“Straight Talk, Straight As the Greek!”
Ireland’s Oedipus and the Modernism of Yeats*

“For the last few days I have been longing for the quiet of the boat,” declared W. B. Yeats.¹ As Yeats boarded the RMS *Lusitania*, bound for New York on January 31, 1914, he welcomed the journey. The previous month had seen him ridiculed in the English press. George Moore (1852–1933), the novelist and his sometime adversary, had published an excerpt from his memoir, *Hail and Farewell*, where he skewered Yeats, recalling a tantrum the poet had thrown in 1904. Speaking for Hugh Lane (1875–1915) and his exhibition of Impressionist paintings, Yeats had appeared “with a paunch, a huge stride, and an immense fur overcoat.”²

We were surprised at the change in his appearance, and could hardly believe our ears when, instead of talking to us as he used to about the old stories come down from generation to generation, he began to thunder like Ben Tillett himself against the middle classes, stamping his feet, working himself into a great passion, and all because the middle classes did not dip their hands into their pockets and give Lane the money he wanted for his exhibition.³

As Yeats sailed from Liverpool, he hoped Moore’s “mere novel writing” would not dog him across the Atlantic,⁴ but the crossing brought him little pleasure and less peace. On board he found the voyage “villainous” – “only one calm day yesterday & we are much behind time,” he told Lady Gregory: “I spent three days on my back, not actually sick but sufficiently miserable.”⁵ Adding to his misery was the fact he could not escape discussion of Moore’s memoir. Some passengers, however, were sympathetic.

¹ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (January 31, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2394.

² Moore (1914a) 167. This excerpt was published in the third volume of Moore’s memoir, *Hail and Farewell! Vale*. See Moore (1914b) 160.

³ Moore (1914a) 167.

⁴ Yeats *Mem* (1972) 269.

⁵ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (February 5, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2396.

One in particular, “a very strange man that introduced himself ... in the smoking room,” he recalled, “came up with a low bow & asked me to write something in his diary for his wife as his wife ‘thought me the greatest poet in the world’.”⁶ Although pleased by the praise, Yeats soon tired of the man, thinking him one of those Americans who “display their personalities at once.”⁷ The eager American was Fenton Benedict Turck (1857–1932), a doctor who had recently been appointed director of a medical laboratory financed by the Pearson Research Fund.⁸ Having attained a “position of eminence and authority” in his profession, Turck was admitted to the practice of medicine in New York without customary examination.⁹ Yet Turck had little interest in discussing his research with Yeats. Instead he spoke mostly of what Yeats called his “one other subject,” the civilization of ancient Greece.¹⁰ “When he talks of his science,” Yeats told Lady Gregory,

he is careful & precise but he has one other subject Greece. On that he is a rhetorician of the wildest kind. He talks American journalese, & constantly talks of ‘moral uplift’ & has the gestures of a public speaker. He sees the whole world as a war between all sorts of evil - in which the Church of Rome is the main sort - & the spirit of Greece ... the moment the restraint of his science was off him he would break out into phrases such as ‘Oh all conquering power of love’ & ejaculations about ‘moral uplift.’¹¹

Despite, or perhaps because of Turck’s enthusiasm for defending the Greeks’ “traditions from the barbarians” – “We must become Greek” he quipped – Yeats thought the doctor an “incoherent & preposterous [*sic*]” man, a man who seemed “to mispronounce every Greek name he uses.”¹²

When Yeats boarded the *Lusitania* in 1914, Greek antiquity was once again becoming a fertile but contested site in his life and imagination, a site marked not only by a long-standing desire to see the promise of the Irish Literary Revival fulfilled – a phenomenon whose Homeric

⁶ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (February 5, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2396.

⁷ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (February 5, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2396.

⁸ Passenger Manifest for the RMS *Lusitania*, sailing from Liverpool to New York City, January 31, 1914, list 4, line 29. See *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820–1897*. Microfilm Publication M237, 675 rolls. NAI: 6256867. Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36. National Archives at Washington, D.C. On Turck’s reputation, see Garland (1926).

⁹ Garland (1926) 54.

¹⁰ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (February 5, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2396.

¹¹ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (February 5, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2396.

¹² Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (February 5, 1914) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 2396.

dimensions have been discussed in the preceding chapters – but also by a desire to dramatically refashion both his poetry and his political vision. Though Yeats had once, like many writers of the Revival, eschewed direct allusion and use of Greek and Roman mythologies early in his creative work, thinking they had become “worn out and unmanageable” having “ceased to be a living tradition,” he nonetheless regarded Greek literature as an important model on which a ‘classical’ form of contemporary Anglo-Celtic literature might be established – unchained from the dominant stream of English literature.¹³ John Synge’s death, however – as well as Yeats’ growing frustration with the Irish “Pulpit and the Press” – prompted a shift in approach.¹⁴ Amid that shift, the literature of Greek tragedy, especially Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, attracted greater interest from Yeats. Put crudely, his attention turned from Homer and the epic ambition of Revival to the dramatic and a self-critical look back over his past endeavors. The reception given to Sophocles in Yeats’ work, however, was not mediated, on the whole, by direct engagement with source texts in Greek. His fascination emerged rather from a multivocal chain of transmission in English, his *King Oedipus* (1926) being not so much the result of a “discrete solo operation” with the original Greek as a self-conscious work of conglomerated retranslation, an aggressive re-stylization of the Victorian vision of Sophocles.¹⁵ The retranslated idiom Yeats built for *King Oedipus* was largely adapted from earlier English versions of the play – even as he eviscerated the poetic affectations that had made these, he thought, hopelessly passé and inauthentic. By bringing Sophocles out of England, and into the orbit of Irish revivalism, however, Yeats carried the Greek across significant “cultural and temporal boundaries,” and, because of that, the governing principles of his translating, his stylizing of Sophocles, evolved too.¹⁶ Retranslations of this kind, Lawrence Venuti has observed, are unique in that they create significance “doubly bound to the receiving situation, determined not only by the receptor values which the translator inscribes in the source text, but also by the values inscribed in a previous version.”¹⁷ As such, retranslations may often come to “reflect,” Venuti writes, “changes in the values and institutions of the translating culture” that may, in some

¹³ Yeats *CW9* (2004) 210. See Introduction, pp. 31–33; Chapter 1, pp. 67–68.

¹⁴ Yeats, “*Sambain*: 1903 – The Theatre, The Pulpit and the Newspapers,” in Yeats *CW8* (2003) 36.

¹⁵ Washbourne (2016) 169.

¹⁶ Lowe (2014) 413.

¹⁷ Venuti (2013) 96.

cases, inspire “new ways of reading and appreciating the source texts.”¹⁸ In the doubly bound case of Yeats and *Oedipus*, however, Venuti’s point may be taken further – not least because the story behind Ireland’s *Oedipus Rex* is not solely one of Yeats repackaging specific Victorian versions of Sophocles. His encounter with the tragedian also forms part of a more complex story, that of Yeats’ so-called modernist reinvention. As Ezra Pound (1885–1972) observed in 1914, Yeats had already begun a radical metamorphosis in his style and in his politics – even as he strove, with difficulty, to work through a version of *Oedipus*. His writing appeared, Pound wrote, “at *prise* with things as they are and no longer romantically Celtic.”¹⁹ Throughout this transformation, Yeats returned, often self-critically, to revise and retranslate parts and fragments of the *Oedipus* cycle over time. These acts of continual revision did not just invigorate “new ways of reading” the ancient Greek tragedy; they also helped push Yeats to reform the aesthetic and political dynamism of his creative work at large.²⁰ The reception of Sophocles thus became a “complex collectivity” on which he could draw, one which did indeed help him produce the Abbey Theatre’s *King Oedipus* in 1926 but which also drew out a wide-ranging stylistic revolution.²¹ *Oedipus* spoke powerfully to Yeats – in equal parts to his lingering belief in the Revival’s Hellenic ambitions and to his growing doubt that any ‘classical’ ideal would ever come to pass in Ireland. In *Oedipus* Yeats examined that dream and that doubt, skeptically renegotiating many of the “debates and identities” that had been central in his early reception of ancient literature.²² The important role that classics played in modernist renegotiations of Celtic revival is, of course, not exclusive to Yeats’ dramatic work with Sophocles alone but can be traced also in the mock Homeric world of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and later in the epic divergence of multilingual collage that both Jones and MacDiarmid derived from Scottish and Welsh movements.

Given Yeats’ shifting approach to Greek reception, it is perhaps unsurprising that Fenton Turck’s superficial moralism, his desire to elevate the Greeks as paragons of perennial virtue, upset him. Two weeks after the *Lusitania* docked, Yeats savaged Turck’s vision of Greece in an extensive

¹⁸ Venuti (2013) 107.

¹⁹ Pound (1914) 68.

²⁰ Venuti (2013) 107.

²¹ Washbourne (2016) 169.

²² Hardwick (2000) 80.

interview with the *New York Times*. Without naming him, he attacked at length his phrase “moral uplift” and argued that American taste for the arts was stuck in a bygone age. “In many ways, in this country,” he told the newspaper, “I think you still live in the Victorian epoch, so far as literature is concerned. Your very phrase ‘moral uplift,’ implies it. I think all that sort of thing a misunderstanding of literature.”²³ The concept of ‘moral uplift’ had possessed some relevance in America during the 1890s in curricular discussions about the place of classical literature in state-sponsored education. In 1898 the president of Vassar College, James Monroe Taylor (1848–1916), had argued that secular education could effectively instill a sense of civic morality without reference to specific religious dogma. “[S]ound education has never been separable from ethical training,” he explained: “By a sketch of the principal periods of Greek and Roman education it was shown that the reform movements in education came in connection with moral uplift. A neglect of moral teaching always involves the degradation of education, the debasement of society, the destruction of the school and the state.”²⁴ Taylor’s belief in the moral utility of classics was part of a wider phenomenon that stressed the “moral genius of the Greeks.”²⁵ As Frank Turner observed, the desire to find in classical antiquity “prescriptive patterns for a literature of moral uplift and sanity” was widespread at the end of the nineteenth century when the “metaphor of Greece” had opened up, popularly speaking, “a humanistic path toward the secular – a path along which most traditional religious landmarks were absent but from which other traditional values still able to address the problems of society and art could be dimly perceived.”²⁶ This “selective portrayal of Greece” proved useful in making tangible a “sense of cultural and ethical confidence about the possibility of a life of dignity, decency, and restraint outside the intellectual and moral boundaries of religion.”²⁷ Surveys of Greek literature from this period were therefore clotted with “prescriptions of traditional English humanist values,” values directed against “commercialism, pluralistic,

²³ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

²⁴ Taylor (1899) 41.

²⁵ Livingstone (1912) 24.

²⁶ Turner (1981) 34, 35.

²⁷ Turner (1981) 35. Granville Stanley Hall (1846–1924), a psychologist and one-time student of William James (1842–1910), argued likewise in *Educational Problems* (1911): “moral uplift” in literature was to be sought above all other “supernal elements.” All “English literature studied in the high school,” he argued, was to be selected neither with religious doctrine in mind nor according to “the dangerous principle of art for art’s sake,” but “primarily with reference to moral values.” Hall (1911) vol. 1, 271.

liberal politics, and subjective morality.”²⁸ As a “conservative ideological weapon,” ancient Greek literature was thus appropriated to consolidate conventional tastes for an educated middle class, confirming what R. W. Livingstone (1880–1960) called “our moral sympathies,” not “the morbid pathology and the charming affectations of modern literature.”²⁹ Ancient writers were not motivated by avant-garde aims, he thought, by “Art for Art’s sake,” or even “Intellect for Intellect’s sake ... its writers do not lead us, like Mr. Yeats, into the bypaths of the human soul, to travel by dark and enchanted ways,” but to a consideration of the “deliberate, laborious, and triumphant battle for virtue.”³⁰

For Yeats, however, the value of Greek literature had little to do with secular virtue or reinforcing conventional codes of social conduct. Greek poets had explored, he thought, the depths of the human mind without restriction – refusing to “deny expression to any profound or lasting state of consciousness.”³¹ No “state of consciousness” ever appeared “morbid and exaggerated” in their literature, for the “Greeks had no exaggerated morbidity of sex, because they were free to express all. They were the most healthy of all peoples. The man who is sex-mad is hateful to me, but he was created by the moralists.”³² If contemporary poets were to eschew “morbidity” and exaggeration in their own work, they had to embrace the desire “to express all” and reject moralism.³³ “It is,” Yeats told the *Times*,

the history of the more intense states of consciousness that a great artist expounds, and it is necessary to his very existence as an artist that he should be free to make use of all the circumstances necessary for the expression of any permanent state of consciousness; and not only is this necessary to the artist, but to society itself.³⁴

During his tour of America that winter, Yeats continued to praise the Greeks as exemplars of artistic freedom while attacking the “commercial theatre” whose “damnable system of morals” had brought a “great deal of money for a great many people” but had sacrificed “great realistic art” for “purely topical sentiment.”³⁵ Despite that theatre’s popularity with the

²⁸ Turner (1981) 33.

²⁹ Turner (1981) 33; Livingstone (1912) 167, 168.

³⁰ Livingstone (1912) 163, 24.

³¹ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³² “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³³ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³⁴ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³⁵ Yeats, “The Theatre and Beauty” (c. December 1913), as in O’Driscoll (1971) 68, 70, 68.

public, Yeats was convinced that a new “revival of poetry” was nonetheless on the rise.³⁶ “Art for art’s sake,” he declared, “the disinterested service of the Muses, passed away for a time, and everywhere now it is coming back. Paris, like London, is ceasing to be commercial in literature.”³⁷ The roots of this revival lay in a new “violent realism ... dragging into the light what is hidden, before it can return to a literature of beauty and peace.”³⁸ Just as the Greeks had embraced the freedom to express all, poets were again drawn to “the inner life, the life of our emotions,” for in the exploration of one’s mind, even the contemporary writer could become “the spectator of the ages.”³⁹ “The Tale of Troy is quite near to me,” he declared,

probably much nearer than anything I read in this morning’s paper ... when I am going to express my own mind, the things I think of when alone, the things I feel as a solitary man – then I want all culture. I cannot know too much. I want a vast symbolism, a phantasmagoria going back to the beginning of the world, and always the Tale of Troy, of Judea, will be nearer to me than my own garden, because I am not limited by time. I am as old as mankind.⁴⁰

Yeats’ tenacious defense of artistic freedom stretched back to bitter disputes he had with both the Irish press and the country’s Catholic hierarchy. Ten years prior, when Synge’s play *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) was vilified as a work whose “libel on womankind” was tantamount to “staging a Lie,” Yeats denounced the criticism.⁴¹ “Extreme politics in Ireland were once the politics of intellectual freedom also,” he wrote, “but now, under the influence of a violent contemporary paper, and under other influences more difficult to follow, even extreme politics seem about to unite themselves to hatred of ideas.”⁴² As he saw it, the press and the pulpit feared “the imagination of highly-cultivated men, who have begun that experimental digging in the deep pit of themselves, which can alone produce great literature.”⁴³ Paralyzed by the “enemies of life, the chimeras of the Pulpit and the Press,” writers were pressured to produce work “full of personified averages, partisan fictions, rules of life

³⁶ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³⁷ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³⁸ “‘American Literature Still in Victorian Era’ – Yeats,” *New York Times* (February 22, 1914) SM10.

³⁹ Yeats, as in O’Driscoll (1971) 70–71.

⁴⁰ Yeats, as in O’Driscoll (1971) 71.

⁴¹ Griffith (1903) 1.

⁴² Yeats, “To the Editor of the *United Irishman*, 24 October 1903,” in Yeats *CL3* (1994) 451.

⁴³ Yeats *CL3* (1994) 451.

that would drill everybody into the one posture, habits that are like the pinafores of charity-school children.”⁴⁴ Audiences had thus become less inclined “to care for a play because it is a play” but rather only “because it is serviceable to some cause.”⁴⁵ Fearing new efforts might place the Irish theatre under an official censor – perhaps England’s Lord Chamberlain, then Edward Hyde Villiers, the 5th Earl of Clarendon (1846–1914) – Yeats set out to defy the “rough-and-ready conscience of the newspaper and the pulpit,” to bait those who were eager “to make the bounds of drama narrower.”⁴⁶ In what was an unlikely place, he discovered a tragedy controversial enough to show that Dublin was indeed “a place of intellectual excitement – a place where the mind goes to be liberated as it was liberated by the theatres of Greece and England and France at certain great moments in their history.”⁴⁷

While on tour in North America in 1904, Yeats visited the University of Notre Dame, and found, to his surprise, a “general lack of religious [*sic*] prejudice” among the priests and students in South Bend.⁴⁸ “I have been entirely delighted by the big merry priests of Notre Dame – all Irish & proud as lucifer of their success in getting Jews & non-conformists to come to their college.”⁴⁹ Given the recent maltreatment Synge’s work had received, Yeats was shocked to learn also that in 1899 a group of undergraduates had been allowed to translate and stage Sophocles’ *Oedipus*

⁴⁴ Yeats *CW8* (2003) 36.

⁴⁵ Yeats, “*Samhain*: 1904 – The Dramatic Movement,” in Yeats *CW8* (2003) 29; Yeats, “To the Editor

of the *United Irishman*, 10 October 1903,” in Yeats *CL3* (1994) 440. Since the Licensing Act of 1737 and the subsequent Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 – a law that adapted censorship to serve “the taste of the emergent Victorian bourgeoisie” – theatrical productions in England were required to seek a formal license from the government. The Lord Chamberlain retained the right to alter the title, dialogue, or general character of scripts submitted for review. According to Yeats, this requirement had helped create a theatre stained by commercial interests and marred with a “pretended hatred of vice and a real hatred of intellect.” In Ireland, by contrast, stage production remained outside English jurisdiction and largely free from external review. “[W]e are better off so far as the law is concerned than we would be in England,” Yeats wrote. “The theatrical law of Ireland was made by the Irish Parliament ... we must be grateful to that the ruling caste of free spirits, that being free themselves they left the theatre in freedom.” Nevertheless, “the prevailing standards for acceptable stage productions in Ireland drew heavily,” as one scholar has suggested, “upon the British model, especially in restricting the representation of living or recently deceased people as stage characters and in prohibiting obscenity and blasphemy. The majority of plays performed in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century were works licensed by the Lord Chamberlain.” Green and Karolidis (2005) 568; Yeats *CW8* (2003) 45; Dean (2004) 11, as well as Fowell and Palmer (1913) 372–74.

⁴⁷ Yeats, “*Samhain*: 1903 – The Reform of the Theatre,” in Yeats *CW8* (2003) 26.

⁴⁸ Yeats, “To Lady Augusta Gregory [18 January 1904],” in Yeats *CL3* (1994) 520.

⁴⁹ Yeats *CL3* (1994) 520.

Rex.⁵⁰ At the time, producing *Oedipus Rex* was censored in England, where it was thought the play's frank exploration of incest and parricide would induce viewers to "gratify unclean and morbid sentiment."⁵¹ Sophocles was widely studied at British schools and universities – Matthew Arnold had praised his poetry for showing "human nature developed in a number of directions, politically, socially, religiously, morally developed – in its completest and most harmonious development" – but *Oedipus* was thought too scandalous to stage, too likely to foment "a vitiated public taste solely in the cause of indecency."⁵² It was precisely that indecency, however, that power to offend which intrigued Yeats. Eager to distinguish Ireland's theatre from England's, eager also to resist any threats that might "limit our freedom from either official or patriotic hands," Yeats returned from America motivated to produce *Oedipus Rex* in Dublin.⁵³ Yet to bring Sophocles to the Irish stage Yeats felt that *Oedipus* would have to be anglicized in a new idiom that would clear the play of any impulse to bowdlerize its scandalous nature. The conventions of "those great scholars of the last century" had often produced a language "too complicated in its syntax for the stage," a language that obscured the tragedy with a "Latin mist."⁵⁴ He wrote, "I think" those

who translated Sophocles into an English full of Latinised constructions and Latinised habits of thought, were all wrong—and that the schoolmasters are wrong who make us approach Greek through Latin. Nobody ever

⁵⁰ The performance at Notre Dame took place on May 15, 1899. It was commemorated with the publication of *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles, Translated and Presented by the Students of Notre Dame University*. The book contained the Greek text of the play alongside an English translation. Introducing the tragedy, the students noted that in producing the *Oedipus* "nothing should be farther from our minds than idolatry or superstition. Although we will introduce you, next Monday, into a pagan temple, in the very hour of sacrifice, we beg that our actions and our sayings be not considered, in any way, as idolatrous.

We do not mean to pray to pagan gods,
And if we swear in Greek, the harm is less."

⁵¹ Stanley Buckmaster, Member of the Advisory Board on Stage Plays, Letter to the Lord Chamberlain, Charles Spencer (November 23, 1910). Lord Chamberlain's Plays Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814, British Library Archive.

⁵² Arnold, "On the Modern Element in Literature" (1857) in Arnold (1960) 28; Sir John Hare, Member of the Advisory Board on Stage Plays, Letter to the Lord Chamberlain, Charles Spencer (November 21, 1910). Lord Chamberlain's Plays Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814, British Library Archive.

⁵³ Yeats, "Sambain: 1903 – The Reform of the Theatre," in Yeats *CW8* (2003) 34. On Yeats' interest in the play, see also Arkins (2005) 156–58 as well as Lauriola (2017) 273–74.

⁵⁴ Yeats, "Oedipus the King" (September 8, 1931) in Yeats *CW10* (2000) 221; Yeats, "Plain Man's *Oedipus*" (15 January 1933) in Yeats *CW10* (2000) 244, 245.

trembled on a dark road because he was afraid of meeting the nymphs and satyrs of Latin literature, but men have trembled on dark roads in Ireland and in Greece.⁵⁵

Because, as Yeats saw it, the kinship of the Irish and the ancient Greek ran deeper even than the bond of Latin and Greek, the Irish theatre was well placed to make men dread again Oedipus' κλύδωνα δεινῆς συμφορᾶς, the “breakers of misfortune” (*OT* 1527).⁵⁶ Drawing on the scholarship of the French philologist Marie Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville (1827–1910), who had insisted that “an old foundation of Graeco-Celtic legends” existed prior “to the separation of the two races,” Yeats believed that Sophoclean tragedy would “seem at home” in Ireland.⁵⁷ “No man has ever prayed to or dreaded one of Vergil's nymphs,” he declared, “but when Oedipus at Colonus went into the Wood of the Furies he felt the same creeping in his flesh that an Irish countryman feels in certain haunted woods in Galway and in Sligo.”⁵⁸ Though the Irish were equipped to strip *Oedipus* of that “half Latin, half Victorian dignity” laid on it by the nineteenth century, Yeats himself, however, had little Greek.⁵⁹ Being a poor student of the language, his headmaster at the Erasmus Smith School in Dublin (a school he attended from 1881 to 1883) once reported that his “taking up French and German simultaneously with Latin and Greek” had been “ruinous.”⁶⁰ Age did not improve his ability – still unable to read classics in the original, Yeats could only gaze, he wrote, “in useless longing at books that have been, through the poor mechanism of translation, the builders of my soul.”⁶¹

Despite this fact, Yeats still pursued *Oedipus* vigorously, seeking help from Greek scholars and amateur enthusiasts. He first approached Gilbert Murray, then of New College, Oxford, who had recently translated Euripides' *Hippolytus*. “Will you translate Edipus Rex for us? We can offer you nothing for it but a place in heaven,” Yeats told him, “but if you do, it

⁵⁵ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 221–22.

⁵⁶ Grene (1942) 154.

⁵⁷ d'Arbois de Jubainville (1903) 69; Yeats *CW10* (2000) 245.

⁵⁸ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 245.

⁵⁹ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 244.

⁶⁰ Murphy (1978) 133. On Yeats' knowledge of Greek, see Arkins (1990) 2–5: “Yeats refused to go to Trinity because he felt he would fail the entrance examination: ‘neither my Classics nor my mathematics were good enough for any examination’ (A 79–80). This statement shows clearly that on leaving the High School Yeats had some knowledge of Latin and Greek, but that it was inadequate.” See Foster (1997) 33–34, Liebregts (1993) 7–21 as well as the Introduction, p. 6n28; Chapter 1, p. 55n35.

⁶¹ Yeats *CW3* (1999) 76.

will be a great event. Our company are excited at the idea ... There is no censor here to forbid it as it has been forbidden in England."⁶² In spring 1904 Murray's *Hippolytus* had a successful production under Harley Granville-Barker's direction at London's Lyric Theatre. The production triggered a minor revival of Attic drama in England that began to make Greek tragedy "no longer the exclusive preserve of the private theatres in the English-speaking world."⁶³ To Yeats, however, Euripides' London success exemplified the lack of stylistic daring he associated with the commercial interests of the English theatre. Thus he pleaded with Murray to "not ask us to play Euripides instead, for Euripides is rapidly becoming a popular English dramatist, and it is upon Sophocles that we have set our imaginations."⁶⁴ Staging *Oedipus* would, he assured him, make a great mark on the public mind in Ireland, persuading the country

that she is very liberal, abhors censors delights in the freedom of the arts, is prepared for anything. When we have performed Edipus the King, and everybody is proud of having done something which is forbidden in England, even the newspapers will give [up] pretending to be timid.⁶⁵

Although he believed Murray would agree, Yeats underestimated how the scholar's aims were shaped by a desire to democratize and popularize the classics.⁶⁶ As Christopher Stray has noted, central to Murray's "vision of Hellenism" was the notion that classics possessed a "reforming and educative mission" in the modern world, a mission to maintain "in an ocean of barbarism" what Murray later called "a large and enduring island of true Hellenic life."⁶⁷ As he saw it, Sophocles did not neatly fit

⁶² Yeats, "To Gilbert Murray, 24 January [1905]," in Yeats *CL4* (2005) 22–23.

⁶³ Hall and Macintosh (2005) 496.

⁶⁴ Yeats *CL4* (2005) 23. It is likely that Yeats' distaste for Euripidean tragedy came by way of Nietzsche's condemnation of *frevelnder Euripides* ("wicked Euripides") in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Unlike Sophocles and Aeschylus, Euripides' "aesthetic maxim," Nietzsche insisted, "that 'to be beautiful everything must be known,' is parallel to the Socratic principle that 'to be good everything must be known.' We may thus regard Euripides as the poet of aesthetic Socratism. Like himself, Socrates was also a spectator at the theatre, who did not comprehend, and therefore did not appreciate the old tragedy; in alliance with him, Euripides ventured to be the herald of a new artistic activity. If then the old tragedy was destroyed, it follows that aesthetic Socratism was the murderous principle." Nietzsche (1901) 4.

⁶⁵ Yeats *CL4* (2005) 23.

⁶⁶ Though Murray was regarded as the "most popular Hellenist of his time," the "most conspicuous Greek propagandist of the day," some like T. S. Eliot doubted whether he had had the "slightest vitalizing effect on English poetry." The "quite dead" attempts that Murray had made in translating Euripides showed that he had no "creative eye," no "creative instinct," only an ability to compose an English "masquerading as a vulgar debasement of the eminently personal idiom of Swinburne." Eliot (1920) 66, 70, 66.

⁶⁷ Stray (2007b) 3; Murray (1954) 58.

this mission. When considering the “historical growth” of his drama, Murray noted Sophocles’ apparent “lack of speculative freedom” and was moreover “offended by what seem to be inexplicable pieces of conventionalism.”⁶⁸ Murray therefore refused Yeats:

O Man, I will not translate the Oedipus Rex for the Irish Theatre, because it is a play with nothing Irish about it: no religion, not one beautiful action, hardly a stroke of poetry. Even the good things that have to be done in order to make the plot work are done through mere loss of temper. The spiritual tragedy is never faced or understood: all the stress is laid on the mere external uncleanness. Sophocles no doubt did many bad things in his life: I would not try to shield him from just blame ... Seriously, I rather hope you wont do the Oedipus. It is not the play for you to cast your lot with. Do the Prometheus ... or even the Persae with a seditious innuendo. Or the Antigone.⁶⁹

Without his help Yeats approached Oliver St John Gogarty (1878–1957) and his former classmate, William Kirkpatrick Magee (1868–1961), better known as John Eglinton. However, before either could complete their versions, Yeats complained about their use of archaisms, fearing that that a “language highly artificial and conscious” would “not prove vocal” on stage.⁷⁰ Though Yeats could not find a scholar prepared to translate an unadorned *Oedipus*, the prospect of flouting the authority of the Lord Chamberlain remained irresistible, and, by late 1911, his plan to stage *Oedipus* in Dublin began to dovetail with a desire to transform his own style, to move from “dreamy languorousness towards concrete vigorousness.”⁷¹ Abandoning the idea of performing someone else’s version, Yeats

⁶⁸ Murray (1897) 203, 239, 203. On Murray’s view of Greek drama, see Griffith (2007) 51–80.

⁶⁹ Murray (1977) 145–46.

⁷⁰ Oliver St John Gogarty, Letter to G. K. A. Bell (April 7, 1905) in Gogarty (1971) 88; Yeats, “To John Millington Synge, 3 October [1906],” in Yeats *CL4* (2005) 509. Gogarty observed that Yeats considered archaism “only admissible when one had discovered it for oneself: there was no defence for the continuance of mere metrical conventions: ‘Hast’, ‘shalt’, ‘thou’, ‘thee’, ‘wert’, ‘art’ etc.” Gogarty (1971) 88.

⁷¹ Longenbach (2010) 322. In August 1909, amid a new censorship crisis stirred up by George Bernard Shaw’s play *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnett* (1909), Yeats once again reaffirmed his desire to produce *Oedipus* on Irish soil. When the under-secretary of Dublin Castle threatened to abolish the patent of the Abbey Theatre for its planned staging of Shaw’s play, Yeats insisted that not only would he proceed with the production of *Posnett* but his theatre would also perform the Oedipus Rex that year. Thinking that the suppression of a “performance of the greatest masterpiece of Greek drama” might be too much for the Castle to risk, Yeats again held up the staging of Sophocles as illustrative of both Ireland’s liberal-mindedness and its bold ingenuity in theatre: “We will put Oedipus the King (also censored in England) on with Posnett, & allow them to take away our Patent. We consider ourselves the guardians of the liberties of the Irish National Theatre of the future, of its political freedom for one thing.” Yeats, “A. E. F. Horniman [15 August 1909],” in Yeats *CL5* (2018) 577; Yeats, “To John Quinn [15 August 1909],” in Yeats *CL5* (2018) 577.

set out to adapt Richard Jebb (1841–1905) and A. W. Verrall's (1851–1912) *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles As Performed at Cambridge November 22–26, 1887. With a Translation in Prose by R. C. Jebb, And a Translation of the Songs of the Chorus in Verse adapted to the Music of C. Villiers Stanford, M. A., by A. W. Verrall.*⁷² He was aided by Walter Nugent Monck (1877–1958), the founder of the Norwich Players and later a director of the Maddermarket Theatre. Though neither had much Greek, they began overwriting Jebb and Verrall in January 1912 with a translation of a translation. This transformation plunged the polarizing reception of *Oedipus* into both the nationalist aspirations of the Abbey Theatre and also Yeats' desire to develop "a manifestly new note" in his poetry.⁷³ With *Oedipus* as a testing ground for "compression and rhythmical invention" – elements that were to become "so characteristic of Modernist verse" – Yeats worked at a Sophoclean aesthetic of "prose directness" and "hard light."⁷⁴

From as early as October 1902 Yeats had professed admiration for "the regulated declamation of the Greeks," a practice "we are trying to get back to."⁷⁵ The "secret" to the "greatest of all the arts ... the art of speech," he argued, had been bequeathed to the civilized nations of Europe by the Greeks, but that secret had been "lost for centuries."⁷⁶ Without it poetry often drifted into an "exaggeration [*sic*] of sentiment & sentimental beauty which," he wrote, "I have come to think unmanly."⁷⁷ For Yeats, the 'weak' poetry of the *fin de siècle's* prevailing "decadence" exemplified the height of sentimental abstraction and exaggeration.⁷⁸ Even his "own early subjective verse" with its "shadows & hollow images" had come from a "region of brooding emotions full of fleshly waters & vapours which kill the spirit & the will, ecstasy & joy equally."⁷⁹ Having

⁷² "The text was without doubt the edition of Jebb mentioned earlier, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles as Performed at Cambridge.*" See Yeats (1989b) 20, 6n5. Jebb and Verrall's (1887) edition printed the English in a column across from the original Greek on each page. Yeats' copy with annotations is held in the Yeats' archive at the National Library of Ireland, MS 40,568/224. Edward O'Shea notes in *A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats's Library* (1985) that "This is the basic text, the point of departure for WB's *King Oedipus*. This copy has been extensively edited by WB, mostly to delete passages of archaic diction, but there are occasional very brief rewritings or additions as well." See O'Shea (1985) 254n1962.

⁷³ Pound (1914) 65.

⁷⁴ Yao (2002) 135; Pound (1914) 66, 67. See also Pound's praise for "hard Sophoclean light" in his poem, "Xenia." Pound (1913) 60.

⁷⁵ "Speaking to Musical Notes," *The Freeman's Journal* (October 31, 1902) 4.

⁷⁶ "Speaking to Musical Notes," *The Freeman's Journal* (October 31, 1902) 4.

⁷⁷ Yeats, "To George Russell (Æ), [April 1904]," in Yeats *CL3* (1994) 577.

⁷⁸ Yeats *CL3* (1994) 577.

⁷⁹ Yeats *CL3* (1994) 577.

grown “weary of that wild God Dionysius [*sic*],” Yeats needed “the Far-Darter,” Apollo, instead, and drawing on a distinction he had encountered in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Yeats rationalized as Apollonic his desire for more concrete, more formal invention in poetry.⁸⁰ George Moore observed at this time the aspersions Yeats cast on the ‘Dionysian’ character of contemporary poetry, the “softness, the weakness, the effeminacy of modern literature [which he thought] could be attributed to ideas.”⁸¹ By contrast, “Yeats said,” Moore recalled,

that the ancient writer wrote about things ... “There are no ideas in ancient literature, only things,” and in support of this theory, reference was made to the sagas, to the Iliad, to the Odyssey, and I listened to him, forgetful of the subject which we had met to discuss. “It is through the dialect,” he said, “that one escapes from abstract words, back to the sensation inspired directly by the thing itself.”⁸²

The longing to see poetry return from the “region of shadows” to “the thing itself” prefigured not only Pound’s Imagist doctrines of 1913 – his insistence on “[d]irect treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” – but also T. E. Hulme’s assertion that “after a hundred years of romanticism” a “classical revival” was afoot in modern poetry, a revival marked by “dry, hard, classical verse” where writers could again remind man of “finiteness ... that he is mixed up with earth. He may jump, but he always returns back; he never flies away into the circumambient gas.”⁸³ For Hulme, the “new classical spirit” differed from the “strange light” of Romanticism, a movement whose view of humanity as an “infinite reservoir full of possibilities” had “debauched us” with “round metaphors of flight ... always flying, flying over abysses, flying up into the eternal gases. The word infinite in every other line.”⁸⁴ The classical vision, by

⁸⁰ Yeats, “To John Quinn, 15 May [1903],” in Yeats *CL3* (1994) 372. Yeats’ interest in Nietzsche’s analysis of Greek tragedy was reported on in *The Daily Chronicle* of May 13, 1903. Lecturing at Clifford’s Inn in London, the poet then extolled “the Dionysic and the Apollonic moods of poetry, which went to make up the perfection of the Greek drama.” These moods were also, he alleged, operative in the literature of ancient Ireland, where Gaelic “folk poetry” corresponded to “the Greek chorus,” its “extravagant cry” being what Yeats called “the utterance of the greatest emotions possible, the heartfelt lyric of an ancient people’s soul.” Ireland’s heroic poetry, by contrast, reflected the “Apollonic” mood, possessing “the sense of form, the dramatic or epic portion of the work of art, the heroic discipline, which, of course, has no relation to morality as generally understood or to service to the State and mankind.” See P. G. W. (1903) 7.

⁸¹ Moore (1911) 348.

⁸² Moore (1911) 348.

⁸³ Yeats *CL3* (1994) 577; Moore (1911) 348; Pound (1918) 95; see the essay “Romanticism and Classicism,” in Hulme (1924) 113, 133, 120.

⁸⁴ Hulme (1924) 113, 127, 116, 127, 120.

contrast, accepted the “sane classical dogma of original sin” and saw the human being as “an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal” that needed “accurate description,” not the “bringing in of some of the emotions that are grouped around the word infinite.”⁸⁵

To free his own writing from “round metaphors of flight,” Yeats had once looked to Synge whose “peasant dialect and dialogue” had enacted something of “the elemental staging of the primitive, unelaborate stage” at the Abbey.⁸⁶ Yet where Synge had employed a knowledge of Irish Gaelic as a corrective to the decorative excess of aestheticism, Yeats had no such recourse. As he began to adapt *Oedipus*, he had no Greek, no Irish, nor even Synge himself to rely on any longer.⁸⁷ What Yeats did have, however, was a belief that his “lyric faculty” was perhaps finally returning.⁸⁸ After publishing his eight-volume *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats* (1908), the poet had wondered whether his talent would “ever recover from the heterogeneous labour of these last few years,” labor that included advocacy for the Abbey as well as his involvement in the disputes of contemporary nationalism.⁸⁹ However, by the time Yeats turned to Sophocles, his responsibilities at the Abbey had diminished and his recovery was underway, due in part to his collaboration with Ezra Pound. In 1910 it was Pound who suggested that Yeats had “come out of the shadows & has declared for life ... Yeats has found within himself spirit of the new air which I by accident had touched before him.”⁹⁰ His poem “No Second Troy,” with its stark vision of Helen – “beauty like a tightened bow, a kind / That is not natural in an age like this” – impressed Pound and intimated that a new kind of Hellenic perfection might be possible.⁹¹ The poem exemplified, Pound wrote, “the spirit of the new things as I saw them in London.”⁹² As he saw it, Yeats was beginning to move away from abstraction, drawn to the *quidditas* of ancient Greek. To articulate in English the ‘whatness’ of reality – just as the Greeks had

⁸⁵ Hulme (1924) 117, 116, 127.

⁸⁶ Hulme (1924) 120; J. M. Synge, Letter to Spencer Brodney (December 10 and 12, 1907), as noted in Synge (1966) 47n1; *Weekly Freeman* (May 23, 1903) 9, as cited in Schuchard (2008) 130.

⁸⁷ For advice about ancient Greek, Yeats and Nugent Monck sometimes called on Rev. Rex Rynd, the preceptor of Norwich Cathedral, and a young scholar named Charles Stewart Power (1892–1950).

⁸⁸ *Yeats Mem* (1972) 172. On Yeats’ poetic transformation in this period, see James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (1988) 14–16.

⁸⁹ *Yeats Mem* (1972) 171.

⁹⁰ “16: Ezra Pound to Margaret Cravens” (June 30, 1910) in Pound (1988) 41.

⁹¹ *Yeats VE* (1987) 256–57. See Introduction, pp. 33–34, Chapter 2, pp. 88–91, and the Conclusion, pp. 248–50.

⁹² “23: Ezra Pound to Margaret Cravens” (November 27, 1910) in Pound (1988) 61.

expressed things and not ideas in verse – soon became a shared ambition for both writers, one which pushed Pound to seek in contemporary work: “no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won’t permit examination. It’s straight talk, straight as the Greek!”⁹³ Yeats similarly stressed a desire for the simplicity and directness of speech. In a diary entry dated December 1912, he elaborated on the “First Principles” then guiding his work:

Not to find ones art by the analysis of language or amid the circumstances of dreams but to live a passionate life, & to express the emotions that find one thus in simple rhythmical language ~~which never shows the obviously studied vocabulary.~~ The words should be the swift natural words that suggest the circumstances out of which they rose ~~of real life.~~ One must be both dramatist and actor & yet be in great earnest.⁹⁴

The extent to which Yeats’ work on Sophocles helped clarify these principles is unclear, but it is clear that in the year prior to articulating this rationale Yeats had been adapting Jebb and Verrall’s *Oedipus*, convinced that the ancient Greeks had perfected a plain “impassioned speech” that spoke of things, and not abstractions.⁹⁵

As Yeats saw it, Jebb and Verrall’s failure with *Oedipus* lay in their desire to keep strictly to “every minutest feature in the Greek structure, every nuance of meaning.”⁹⁶ They thereby blunted the play’s pathos, drowning the tragedy in unspeakable literalism and scholarly abstraction, and so, in January 1912, Yeats began to break down their idiom “from the point of view of speech,” thinking he might rescue Sophocles from the “old, learned, respectable bald heads” of the scholars.⁹⁷ Jebb was, of course, widely regarded as one having “sympathetic insight” into what Samuel Henry Butcher (1850–1910) once called “the niceties of Sophoclean language,” its “deflections from ordinary usage” and its “pregnant expressions.”⁹⁸ His seven-volume edition of “perfectly literal” Sophoclean translations, published between 1883 and 1896, showed evidence of a “remarkable and, so far as I know, a unique, faculty of infusing poetry into

⁹³ Pound, “7: To Harriet Monroe” (October 1912) in Pound (1971) 11.

⁹⁴ Yeats, “First Principles.” Maud Gonne Xmas Notebook, 1912 (NLI 30, 358). Yeats Archive, Box 88.2, SUNY Stony Brook. See also Foster (1997) 476–77. Yeats’ obsession with “natural order,” “swifter dialogue a more direct syntax,” was a long-standing fixation. See, for example, Yeats, “Letter to Gordon Bottomley” (January 8, 1910) in Yeats *CLJ* (2018) 679–80.

⁹⁵ “Speaking to Musical Notes,” *The Freeman’s Journal* (October 31, 1902) 4.

⁹⁶ Review of R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, with Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose* in *Journal of Education* 6.178 (n. s.) (May 1, 1884) 180.

⁹⁷ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (6 January 1912) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 1794; Yeats *VE* (1987) 337.

⁹⁸ Butcher (1884) 796.

grammar, of leading his readers, through particles, moods, and tenses, vividly to realise the dramatic situation and enter into the feelings of the speaker.”⁹⁹ To Yeats, however, Jebb’s literalism made for poor dialogue and utterly un-Hellenic stagings of Sophocles. Jebb himself set little store by claims of stylistic or dramatic merit for his versions of Sophocles, once saying of his *Electra* (1870) that “Nothing is staked upon it; it pretends to be nothing more than a school & college book, & if thought useful in that character, it will have fulfilled its purpose.”¹⁰⁰ Yeats, though, needed more than a schoolbook *Oedipus*: he wanted an unmitigated, ‘pure’ *Oedipus* for the Abbey stage, one that could capture for a modern audience the felt passion of spoken Greek. The play’s directness was not clouded by the “elaborate diction” of Sophocles’ “original and complex” Greek.¹⁰¹ However, when Jebb and Verrall had sought a bare equivalence in English, Sophocles’ “unusual words and phrases” were confused in a new and foreign context: words and phrases once thought to “escape notice” in Greek “because they harmonize so perfectly with other factors in their context” became almost unreadable.¹⁰² Yeats therefore put “readers and scholars out of [his] mind,” retranslating his own version “to be sung and spoken. The one thing that I kept in mind was that a word unfitted for living speech, out of its natural order, or unnecessary to our modern technique, would check emotion and tire attention.”¹⁰³

For Jebb, expressing the literal nuances of Greek had presented both stylistic problems for English and more substantive thematic difficulties as well. Sophocles was a “model of serenity and restraint, and the perfect representative of ‘the best Greek time,’” and his work moreover demonstrated “evidence of true faith and morals.”¹⁰⁴ Thus Jebb sought to present him in an exacting manner not only to show “the higher moral and mental side of the age of Pericles” but to provide sanctuary to those eager to “retreat from civilization.”¹⁰⁵ Unlike Aeschylus and Euripides (whose “irrationality and pathos” Jebb thought modern), Sophocles exemplified

⁹⁹ Review of R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments. With Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose* in *The Athenaeum* 2948 (April 26, 1884) 531; Butcher (1884) 796–97.

¹⁰⁰ Jebb, as in Stray (2013) 47. For its time, though, Jebb’s ‘Englished’ Sophocles was considered “different from the cumbrous translationese which was then so common.” Stray (2007a) 79. See also Yeats *CW10* (2000) 221–22.

¹⁰¹ Earp (1944) 147; Long (1968) 3.

¹⁰² Long (1968) 3.

¹⁰³ Yeats, “Notes” for *Sophocles’ King Oedipus: A Version for the Modern Stage*, as in Yeats (1966) 851. See also Morash (2020) 218–34.

¹⁰⁴ Stray (1998) 219; Turner (1981) 102.

¹⁰⁵ Jebb (1877) 88; Stray (1998) 219.

“balance and poise, grandeur and grace combined.”¹⁰⁶ His “noble tone of conciliation between sacred tradition and a progressive culture, between authority and reason, between the letter and the spirit of religion,” opposed much of the modern spirit, and thus Sophocles could not “easily come home” to contemporary readers.¹⁰⁷ “If Sophocles has been,” he explained,

on the whole, less popular in the modern world than either Aeschylus or Euripides, one reason may be this – there is no other Greek poet whose genius belongs so peculiarly to the best Greek time. Aeschylus has an element of Hebrew grandeur, Euripides has strong elements of modern pathos and romance ... But in order fully to appreciate Sophocles, we must place ourselves in sympathy with the Greek mind in its most characteristic modes of thought and with the Greek sense of beauty in its highest purity.¹⁰⁸

To put a reader in touch with Sophocles’ “union of power with purity of taste,” Jebb disavowed verse translation and sought to show in prose “fully and exactly how the work of Sophocles is understood by me, both in its larger aspects, and at every particular point.”¹⁰⁹ To this end he asserted an “absolute fidelity to the original,” not adherence “to the letter of the original, at the cost of the spirit, but to the spirit as expressed in the letter,” and prose, he maintained, was preferable to metrical verse for that would possess “a more or less modern spirit of its own, due to its very form.”¹¹⁰ For Jebb, translation was to be approached “solely from the stand-point of the *commentator*, as an indispensable instrument of lucid interpretation,” to aid those who might be induced to “read a play of Sophocles as they would read a great poem of a modern poet, – with no such interposing nightmare of τῦπτω as at Athens came between Thackeray and his instinctive sense of what was admirable in the nature and art around him.”¹¹¹ The interpretation that Jebb gave to *Oedipus*

¹⁰⁶ Stray (1998) 220, 219–220.

¹⁰⁷ Jebb (1877) 88.

¹⁰⁸ Jebb (1877) 88.

¹⁰⁹ Jebb (1893) 189; Jebb (1883) vi.

¹¹⁰ Jebb (1883) vi.

¹¹¹ Jebb (1883) vi, vii–viii. Citing Thackeray’s view that Athens was “a humbug,” Jebb refers to the fierce, physical disciplinary methods by which some British students were made to learn Greek and Latin. Thackeray’s visit to Athens had confirmed his “doubts about the classics,” doubts that he first experienced while a student at the London Charterhouse in the 1820s. There he was made to learn Greek at the hands of a “brute of a schoolmaster, whose mind was as cross-grained as any ploughboy’s in Christendom ... whose lips, when they were not mouthing Greek or grammar, were yelling out the most brutal abuse of poor little cowering gentlemen.” “Fancy the brutality,”

Tyrannus (1884) was no such “interposing nightmare” but a prose rendering considered “perfectly literal . . . more literal than one of Bohn’s, yet written in the clear, racy idiomatic English in which Mr. Jebb has no superior.”¹¹² Lauded for its “literary merits,” Jebb’s work was a “treat of the very highest kind,” one composed by not only a “scholar and critic of the largest attainments” but one of “great literary ability” as well.¹¹³

[A]nd again and again, in unraveling the manifold subtleties of his author, [Jebb] gives us brilliant exemplifications of this true literalness, this triumph of the living spirit over the dead letter.¹¹⁴

Although some still doubted that Sophocles possessed “the Greek sense of beauty in its highest purity,” Jebb was not alone in claiming “grand moral effects” for his work.¹¹⁵ Not only Matthew Arnold but Edward Hayes Plumptre (1821–91) – the effusive translator, professor and chaplain of King’s College, London – also believed that in Sophocles and “[n]owhere” else, “even in the ethics of Christian writers, are there nobler assertions of a morality divine, universal, unchangeable, of laws whose dwelling is on high.”¹¹⁶ Though the Greek poet had lived with “the absence of a higher knowledge” with “a veil over the central truth,” he had not composed “half rhetorical sophistry,” but wrote instead of the “true principles of all morality,” timeless principles “of prior obligation to all conventional arrangements of society, or the maxims of political expediency.”¹¹⁷ “We may well rest in the belief that the name of Sophocles stands as clear and unblemished,” Plumptre claimed, “as that of one against whom like charges were brought in the very recklessness of slander, the noble and true-hearted Socrates.”¹¹⁸ The characterization of

he declared, “of a man who began a Greek grammar with ‘τύπτω, I thrash! We were all made to begin it in that way.’” Jebb hoped, it seems, his translation could mollify the methods by which English speakers learned the classics. See Thackeray (1845) 45. See also Adams (2015) 63–68.

¹¹² Jebb (1883) vii; Review of R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments. With Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose* in *The Athenaeum* 2948 (April 26, 1884) 531.

¹¹³ “Mr Jebb’s ‘Sophocles,’” *The Spectator* 57.2913 (April 26, 1884) 555.

¹¹⁴ Review of R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments. With Critical Notes, Commentary, and Translation in English Prose* in *The Athenaeum* 2948 (April 26, 1884) 531.

¹¹⁵ Jebb (1877) 88; “Nay in Sophocles what is valuable is not so much his contributions to psychology & the anatomy of sentiment, as the grand moral effects produced by *style*. For the style is the expression of the nobility of the poet’s character, as the matter is the expression of the richness of his mind.” Arnold, “To Arthur Hugh Clough” (c. 1 March 1849), in Arnold (1993) 53; on the views of Arnold and Jebb, see Stray (1998) 218–21, Turner (1981) 28–33 as well as Vance (2015) 187–88.

¹¹⁶ Plumptre (1867) lxxvi. See also Turner (1981) 102.

¹¹⁷ Plumptre (1867) lxxvii, lxxvi.

¹¹⁸ Plumptre (1867) lxxiv.

Sophocles as a Socratic, magnanimous victim “free from the alloy of baser metal” reflected the desire to see his drama “provide, within limits, instruction for human beings in a later time and place.”¹¹⁹

Despite this characterization, however, controversy still swirled around the prospect of publicly producing *Oedipus*. When stage licenses were sought, the censor refused them, thinking there was little way of conveying *Oedipus* “in such a manner as not in any way to involve immoral teaching.”¹²⁰ Even when Gilbert Murray’s version was considered in 1910, the criterion for approval remained clear: a production would be allowed when it was shown that its translation “modifies rather than accentuates anything in the language which would cause offence.”¹²¹ Sensitive to *Oedipus*’ reception, Yeats took up the tragedy – not to burnish Sophocles’ reputation as a moral poet (after the fashion of Arnold, Jebb and Plumptre) – but to shock the public and to provoke newfound respect for the national theatre he had founded in Dublin. As Steven Yao has observed, “Yeats conceived of translation not just as a literary exercise, but as a form of political action as well; and the extraordinarily drawn-out process that finally issued in his 1928 version of *King Oedipus* began, fittingly enough, with an expressly and perhaps even crudely political desire to stage the play.”¹²² Intent on making his audience tremble with the “same creeping” as Oedipus himself had felt, Yeats sought to pry Sophoclean reception from conventional Christian notions, the so-called “unwritten ... eternal law of purity,” with which Greek literature had then been broadly painted.¹²³ Working from

¹¹⁹ Plumptre (1867) lxxiv; Turner (1981) 15–16. See also Jenkyns (1980) 60–73, and Stray (1998) 235–70.

¹²⁰ Sir John Hare, Letter to the Lord Chamberlain, Charles Spencer (November 21, 1910) Lord Chamberlain’s Plays Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814, British Library Archive. Disputes over the character of *Oedipus* reflected a “wider public debate concerning consanguineous sexual relations, which culminated in the passing of The Punishment of Incest Act (1908).” Before 1908 incest in England and Wales had been prosecuted in “ecclesiastical courts, despite numerous attempts to make it a criminal offence. When a Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and the House of Commons was set up to investigate the state of theatre censorship in Britain, the anxieties concerning incest and the opposition to the Lord Chamberlain’s Office came together in the discussions of Sophocles’ proscribed play.” Macintosh (2008) 529.

¹²¹ Stanley Buckmaster, Letter to the Lord Chamberlain, Charles Spencer (November 23, 1910). Another member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Advisory Board commented at this time that Murray’s manner of translating the Greek had toned down the depiction of that “most horrible evil” – incest – “in one or two places he softens the language a little to save susceptibilities.” Walter Raleigh, Member of the Advisory Board on Stage Plays, Letter to the Lord Chamberlain, Charles Spencer (November 22, 1910). Lord Chamberlain’s Plays Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814, British Library Archive.

¹²² Yao (2002) 126.

¹²³ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 245; Jebb (1877) 88.

manuscripts on which Monck had already made revisions during the autumn of 1911, Yeats strove to free Jebb and Verrall of hypotactic constructions, relying on short phrases, repetition, apposition and asyndeton to achieve an “idiomatic fragmentation ... modeled on normal patterns of English speech.”¹²⁴ He was, he told Lady Gregory, taking Jebb and turning

him into simple speakable English dictating the result. Yesterday I had Rynd's help he took the Greek text and looked up the literal meaning of passages for me. The choruses I am putting into rough unrhymed verse. I am of course making it very simple in fact turning it into an Abbey play. Monck had already made his cuts.¹²⁵

The end results in 1912, though far less experimental and less conversant with the original Greek, could nonetheless be regarded as a forerunner of modernist bricolage in translation, a form Pound later perfected in *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), where he employed collage, emendation and outright mistranslation to upset the common conventions of a more scholarly approach.¹²⁶ By contrast, roughly contemporaneous attempts to render *Oedipus* – not only by Jebb and Verrall but also by Gilbert Murray as well as his teacher, Francis Storr (whose Loeb translation was published in 1912) – had domesticated Sophocles with an English style that elided Greek's “different organization of language,” an organization “for which there are no precise, or constant, equivalents.”¹²⁷ Storr, in particular, was eager to draw Sophocles into the canon of English masters. In the introduction for his translation of *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, he not only compared Sophocles' life to that of Tennyson but assigned him Ben Jonson's epitaph for Shakespeare as well:

“His life was gentle.” *Gentle* is the word by which critics ancient and modern have agreed to characterize him. The epitaph is Shakespeare's, and Ben Jonson applies it to Shakespeare himself, but it fits even more aptly the sweet singer of Colonus, in whom “the elements were so mixed” as to form what the Greeks expressed by εὐκόλος.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Baker (1967) 94. On Yeats' desire “to make the language of poetry coincide with passionate, normal speech,” see Earle (1988) 19–48, Parkinson (1964) 181–231, and Arkins (1994) 3–26. See also Yeats, “Introduction” (1937) in Yeats *CW5* (1994) 212.

¹²⁵ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (January 7, 1912) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 1796.

¹²⁶ On the *Homage*, see Sullivan (1964), Bush (1983) 61–79, Hooley (1988), Rudd (1994) 117–58, as well as Thomas (1983) and Willett (2005) 173–220.

¹²⁷ Carne-Ross (2010) 238.

¹²⁸ Storr (1912) ix. *Liddell-Scott-Jones* glosses the range of meaning for εὐκόλος as “easily satisfied,” or “content,” when of persons; when of things, “easy” or “easy to understand” and when of mind, “at peace,” “contented,” “good-natured” or even ready “ready” or “agile.”

Yeats, by contrast, was driven by a desire to atomize and reconfigure literal equivalence, to disrupt the *eukolic* vision of Sophocles, which had made the Greek poet seem ‘native’ for broader public consumption. Yet, as David Clark and James McGuire observe, this did not come easily. Yeats had thought *Oedipus* could be ready for production in early winter 1912 – “Jan 18 we play Oedipus,” he confidently told Lady Gregory – but his progress with the play was slower than expected.¹²⁹ “I am merely putting the dialogue into prose and choruses into rough unrhymed verse,” Yeats explained, “I’m not trying to make a serious work of it. I haven’t time for that, but something had to be done for the existing translations won’t speak.”¹³⁰ Though his *Oedipus* began as no “serious work,” the difficulty of making Sophocles speak is evident in the manuscripts. Where, in the tragedy’s opening lines – beginning ὦ τέκνα, Κάδμου τοῦ πάλαι νέα τροφή – Jebb and Verrall had been prolix,

My children, latest-born to Cadmus who was of old, why are ye set before me thus with wreathed branches of suppliants, while the city reeks with incense, rings with prayers for health and cries of woe? I deemed it unmeet, my children, to hear these things at the mouth of others, and have come hither myself, I, Oedipus renowned of all. Tell me, then, thou venerable man ...¹³¹

Yeats felt their archaizing language awkward. He began compressing their version, making the nominal clause “latest-born to Cadmus who was of old” into the short apposition “descendants of Cadmus.” Despite his efforts, however, the earliest revisions – those dating from 1912 in a manuscript known as “Rex 2” – still kept much of Jebb and Verrall’s version. When compared with the stark and sober questions from the final published version of *King Oedipus* (1928), “Rex 2” shows a gradual modification.¹³²

My children } descendants of Cadmus that was of old ~~time~~, why do you come before ^{me} ~~me thus?~~ ^{with} ~~With~~ the wreathed branches of suppliants, while the city smokes with incense and murmurs ~~with~~ ^{and} cries ~~and prayers~~ of sorrow; ^{with} prayers for health. I would not ~~hear~~ ^{learn} ~~these~~ from another’s mouth, and therefore I have questioned you myself. Answer me, old man.¹³³

¹²⁹ Yeats, “To Lady Gregory” (December 20, 1911) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 1786.

¹³⁰ Yeats, “To A. H. Bullen” (January 7, 1912) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 1795.

¹³¹ Jebb and Verrall (1887) 1.

¹³² Yeats (1989b) 28–34.

¹³³ Yeats (1989b) 189.

King Oedipus (1928):

Children, descendants of old Cadmus, why do
 you come before me, why do you carry the branches
 of suppliants, while the city smokes with incense
 and murmurs with prayer and lamentation? I would
 not learn from any mouth but yours, old man, there-
 fore I question you myself.¹³⁴

A curious effect of Yeats' 'double retranslation' of this passage – his retranslation of "Rex 2" – is the rendering of ὦ τέκνα. Had he kept Jebb and Verrall's "My children" (rather than simply choosing to begin with "Children"), less of the allusivity implicit in the Greek source text would have been lost. The invocation of "My children" for ὦ τέκνα signals, rather forcefully, the irony surrounding Oedipus' claims to parenthood and rightful leadership in Thebes. The hermeneutic discretion employed – to add words (in this case a simple possessive pronoun) – makes explicit what is more obscure in the Greek, foreshadowing the twisted realities of kinship Oedipus later confronts. Yeats' further alteration to "Children" in the 1928 version blunts the suggestiveness of Jebb and Verrall's version for a greater formality in address. Furthermore, where Sophocles expressed the opening question with a single verb, θαύζετε, Jebb and Verrall rendered the Greek literally, reduplicating the verb and also the participle, ἐξοστεμμένοι, as "with wreathed branches of suppliants." Yeats' 1928 text, by contrast, broke down the original into a vigorous repetition of questions, questions that dissolved the complexity of syntax introduced by the Greek participle, and allowed for an urgent staccato of interrogatives: "why do you come ... why do you carry ..." According to Clark and McGuire's exhaustive account of the play's development, it was, in part, Paul Masqueray's French translation, *Oedipe-Roi* (1922), which helped Yeats to alter "every sentence" of the first revision.¹³⁵ A better understanding of passages in French "freed" him to use a "more idiomatic English," to rid Jebb and Verrall of anything "that might not be intelligible on the Blasket Islands."¹³⁶

Although Yeats completed a draft of the dialogue in February, having "made a fine version," the motivating force behind his interest in Sophocles was, by then, removed: the Lord Chamberlain lifted the ban

¹³⁴ Yeats (1966) 809.

¹³⁵ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 244. See Yeats (1989b) 37–39.

¹³⁶ Yeats (1989b) 38; Yeats *CW10* (2000) 245.

for Max Reinhardt's January 1912 production of Gilbert Murray's *Oedipus, King of Thebes* (1911).¹³⁷ Murray was initially hesitant to take on the task, but he decided at last to translate the "great stage masterpiece of Sophocles" with "English rhyming verse," convinced by what he called "the fascination of this play, which has thrown its spell on me."¹³⁸ *Oedipus* did contain "a few points of unsophisticated technique," but it seemed to Murray then "drama of amazing grandeur and power."¹³⁹ Murray still preferred the "philosophic reflections," "subtleties of technique" and "tremendous choric effects" of Euripides, but he admitted that in "respect of plot, no Greek play comes near [*Oedipus*]."¹⁴⁰ Murray's apparent 'about-face' was indebted, in part, to his "old master, Francis Storr," with whom Murray had read Sophocles at the Merchant Taylors' School.¹⁴¹ For Yeats, however, the Lord Chamberlain's acquiescence diminished the polemic of Irish *Oedipus*, and yet it was only in hindsight that Yeats attributed his loss of interest to the ban's removal.¹⁴² The immediate cause was the fact that his efforts to make the choruses of *Oedipus* seem spoken had been tested by the odes' metrical variation and syntactic complexity.¹⁴³ From as early as 1904, Yeats anticipated that the Greek chorus would present a challenge both in translation and on the stage, telling London's *Evening Mail* then that the "greatest difficulty" in performing Greek tragedy lay "in the management of the chorus."¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, he was still confident then that "this little obstacle will be overcome," but managing the odes into a desirable 'straight talk' proved troublesome.¹⁴⁵ That trouble was manifested in the turgid archaisms he inherited from Jebb and Verrall, as in this passage, excerpted from their first chorus:

O sweetly-speaking message of Zeus, in what spirit hast thou come from golden Pytho unto glorious Thebes? I am on the rack, terror shakes my

¹³⁷ Yeats, Letter to Lady Gregory (21, 22 February 1912), as in Yeats (1989b) 29. On Max Reinhardt's production, see Hall and Macintosh (2005) 538–54, Macintosh (1997) 298–301, as well as Purdom (1955) 129–33.

¹³⁸ Murray (1911) v, iii, v.

¹³⁹ Murray (1911) viii.

¹⁴⁰ Murray (1911) xi, x, viii.

¹⁴¹ Murray (1911) xi.

¹⁴² Yeats *CW10* (2000) 219–220. See also Yeats (1989b) 29–33, on Yeats' reaction to Max Reinhardt's London production of January 1912.

¹⁴³ Macintosh (2008) 530.

¹⁴⁴ R. M. (1904) 4.

¹⁴⁵ R. M. (1904) 4. When Yeats returned to working on "the material version of a chorus for a version of *Oedipus* intended for the stage" in February 1926, he reiterated that his verse had "more and more adopted – seemingly without any will of mine – the syntax and vocabulary of common personal speech." Yeats, "Letter to H. J. C. Grierson (21 February [1926])," in Yeats *LWBY* (1955) 710.

soul, O thou Delian Healer to whom wild cries rise, in holy fear of thee, what thing thou wilt work for me, perchance unfelt before, perchance returning in the fulness of the years: tell me, thou immortal Voice, born of golden Hope!¹⁴⁶

In imitation Verrall employed two questions in his version; but Yeats composed instead four syntactically similar questions that allowed him to eliminate many of the relative clauses and prepositional phrases.

What message comes to famous Thebes from the Golden House?
 What message of disaster from that sweet-throated Zeus?
 What monstrous thing our fathers saw do the seasons bring?
 Or what that no man ever saw, what new monstrous thing?
 Trembling in every limb I raise my loud importunate cry,
 And in a sacred terror wait the Delian God's reply.¹⁴⁷

The alliterative repetition articulated in these questions better suggested, Yeats believed, the syntactic cadence of spoken English.¹⁴⁸ Yet, though that cadence framed the ode for better dramatic treatment, Yeats' desire to mitigate the "Latin mist" of Jebb and Verrall also drastically reduced the thematic scope and metrical variation of the Sophoclean original.¹⁴⁹ In Greek the four odes of *Oedipus* comprised roughly 155 lines, lines that Jebb and Verrall expanded into 213 lines. Ignorant of Greek, Yeats shrank from the difficulties posed by the 'little obstacle' of chorale management and simplified them into a mere fifty-eight lines. Even the odes, he felt, had to appear closer to "the syntax and vocabulary of common personal speech."¹⁵⁰ "I spoke out every sentence, very often from the stage," he declared, "with one sole object that the words should sound natural and fall in their natural order, that every sentence should be a spoken, not a written, sentence."¹⁵¹ In a sense, then, Yeats refused to engage deeply with the difficulty of the odes, with the foreignness the Greek enacts in the "sudden switch from statement to the cadence of daemonic possession."¹⁵² Instead his odes were set to be only more

¹⁴⁶ Jebb and Verrall (1887) 5.

¹⁴⁷ Yeats (1966) 813.

¹⁴⁸ This dramatic repetition of interrogatives, modeled on contemporary English dialect, gained prominence in other works of contemporaneous poetry – perhaps most notably in Eliot's "A Game of Chess" from *The Waste Land* (1922), where, from lines 111 to 138, domestic ennui shifts into aggressive interrogation.

¹⁴⁹ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 245.

¹⁵⁰ Yeats *LWBY* (1955) 710.

¹⁵¹ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 244.

¹⁵² Carne-Ross (2010) 244.

speakable and, as such, their role in the tragedy was diminished. Nevertheless, the “strategic repetition” of interrogatives “functioning independently of narrative connection” became a syntactic hallmark of Yeats’ lyric and dramatic verse, especially after the 1916 premiere of his Noh drama, *At the Hawk’s Well*.¹⁵³ Repetition of questions had become a means for refusing clear “narrative connection,” a way of centering dramatic action not on plot or character but on the accumulation of fragmentary perceptions, a fabric threaded around what Yeats saw as the cadence of a “single metaphor.”¹⁵⁴ This approach exemplified what James Longenbach has called some of the “organizing principles that would ultimately distinguish so many modernist long poems, beginning with the early cantos and *The Waste Land*.”¹⁵⁵ Thus Yeats’ atomization of Jebb and Verrall – the “intense unnatural labour” he exerted in doubly retranslating the ‘Victorian’ Sophocles with a “bare, hard and natural” idiom – while not as effective as he might have hoped, nonetheless played a role in developing forms of poetic collage that could weave together an “intricately reticulated fabric of multiple images.”¹⁵⁶

Having left the choruses unfinished in 1912, Yeats did not return again to work on *Oedipus* until early 1926 when – likely not by coincidence – the specter of official censorship had reemerged to cast its shadow over artistic endeavors in Ireland. When declared a dominion within the British Commonwealth in 1922, the Irish Free State effectively took on “the whole body of British statute law – and English common law tradition – with a few minor exceptions consequent on the terms of the Treaty.”¹⁵⁷ No exception dealt directly with censorship and so with “regard to the legislation controlling obscene literature the establishment of the Irish Free State brought no change at all.”¹⁵⁸ Various organizations began, however, to loudly insist that the new government take up new measures to “combat” what the Catholic Truth Society had called “the pernicious influence of infidel and immoral publications.”¹⁵⁹ “However

¹⁵³ Longenbach (2010) 325.

¹⁵⁴ Longenbach (2010) 325.

¹⁵⁵ Longenbach (2010) 325.

¹⁵⁶ Yeats *LWBY* (1955) 710; Yeats, “To Olivia Shakespear” (December 7, 1926) in Yeats *LWBY* (1955) 720; Longenbach (2010) 326.

¹⁵⁷ Adams (1968) 13.

¹⁵⁸ Adams (1968) 13.

¹⁵⁹ A description of the Society’s aims was advertised in the entry for the “Catholic Truth Society of Ireland” in *The Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac for 1920* (1920) 207.

we may differ in our political opinions to-day," wrote the Rev. R. S. Devane (1876–1951),

and however bitter the feelings that have arisen in recent times may be, I think we may truthfully say that Republican and Free Stater, Capitalist and Worker, Protestant and Catholic, would all rejoice in the re-definition of 'indecent' or 'obscenity,' thereby setting up 'as high a standard as possible,' and so giving a moral lead to other nations.¹⁶⁰

According to Devane, the nascent government of the Free State could perhaps best distinguish the character of Ireland by creating a "new legal definition of 'obscenity' and 'indecent' which would be in complete harmony with the religious ideals and moral standards of the people."¹⁶¹ The clergy, he believed, were to have a critical role in shaping public opinion and policy within the Free State, for the "time is now ripe," he asserted,

for the introduction of Social Legislation ... we are still dominated by old traditions, and by the hitherto prevailing legal standards of public morality. Can these be broken and replaced? This depends on the pressure brought to bear on the Government.¹⁶²

In February 1926 the Minister of Justice, Kevin O'Higgins (1892–1927), responded and convened a "Committee of Enquiry on Evil Literature," which he tasked to explore "whether it is necessary or advisable in the interest of public morality to extend the existing powers of the State to prohibit or restrict the sale and circulation of printed matter."¹⁶³ On examining the matter, the committee recommended expanding censorship, proposing in its final report (dated December 28, 1926) the creation of a board "to advise the Minister for Justice as to any books, newspapers or magazines circulated in the Saorstát that, in the opinion of the Board, are demoralising and corrupting."¹⁶⁴ The Minister of Justice would then possess the "power to prohibit by notice" the circulation of immoral literature as well as the authority to punish by fine or imprisonment those "persons exposing for sale or circulating any prohibited book."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Devane (1925) 189–90.

¹⁶¹ Devane (1925) 203.

¹⁶² Devane (1925) 202.

¹⁶³ Committee on Evil Literature (1927) 3. On the committee, see Murphy (2017) 140–72.

¹⁶⁴ Committee on Evil Literature (1927) 18.

¹⁶⁵ Committee on Evil Literature (1927) 18.

As a member of the Irish Senate, Yeats often supported the policies of W. T. Cosgrave's government, but he abhorred the notion that the Free State would curtail intellectual freedom in so drastic a fashion (in a stricter form than had been enforced under British rule). As Elizabeth Cullingford observes:

The censorship dispute marks a real diminution of Yeats's respect for the Cosgrave Government. It had betrayed its trust by bowing to mob fanaticism ... He left the Senate, then, a disillusioned man. During his term of office he had advocated order, unity, and liberty: the Government had supplied order but had infringed liberty and thus jeopardized unity.¹⁶⁶

Yeats railed against this legislation. He believed that to "give one man, the Minister of Justice, control over the substance of our thought, for its definition of 'indecenty' and such vague phrases as 'subversive of public morality,'" would

permit him to exclude *The Origin of Species*, Karl Marx's *Capital*, the novels of Flaubert, Balzac, Proust, all of which have been objected to somewhere on moral grounds, half the Greek and Roman Classics, Anatole France and everybody else on the Roman index, and all great love poetry. The Government does not intend these things to happen, the Commission on whose report the Bill was founded did not intend these things to happen, the holy gunmen and 'The Society of Angelic Warfare' do not intend all these things to happen; but in legislation intention is nothing, and the letter of the law everything, and no Government has the right, whether to flatter fanatics or in mere vagueness of mind to forge an instrument of tyranny and say that it will never be used.¹⁶⁷

Decades earlier, Yeats had believed that poetry and drama produced for the cause of Irish nationhood – literature modeled on the classics even – might invigorate "a conception of the race as noble as Aeschylus and Sophocles had of Greece."¹⁶⁸ Yet with British rule largely cast off, Ireland's newfound freedom still remained threatened by "mob censorship."¹⁶⁹ Thus Yeats sometimes felt himself in "deep gloom about Ireland," still believing that "the extreme party may carry the country."¹⁷⁰ "I see no hope of escape from bitterness ... When men are very bitter, death & ruin draw them on as a rabbit is supposed to be drawn on by the dancing

¹⁶⁶ Cullingford (1981) 193.

¹⁶⁷ Yeats, "The Irish Censorship" (September 29, 1928) in Yeats *CW10* (2000) 215–16.

¹⁶⁸ Yeats *Mem* (1972) 184.

¹⁶⁹ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 216.

¹⁷⁰ Yeats, "To Olivia Shakespear" (December 22, 1921) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 4039.

of the fox.”¹⁷¹ “Fixed ideas” and “Nationalist abstractions” continued to rise unabated, but Yeats continued to define Ireland’s literary potential with terms and examples drawn from classical antiquity, still envisioning “on occasions,” as one scholar has observed, the country’s “future as being allied to the pattern of the Greeks.”¹⁷² His understanding, however, of how that future could indeed fit any ancient Greek pattern had evolved dramatically throughout the many years it took to bring his *King Oedipus* to the stage.

At its first production on December 7, 1926, *King Oedipus* was hailed for being “simply and effectively set and dressed” – Yeats’ language even receiving especial praise for its being “very clear in meaning and actable” – but Yeats had long since begun to seriously doubt whether any staging of Sophocles could, in fact, convince Ireland, as he once hoped, that “she is very liberal, abhors censors delights in the freedom of the arts.”¹⁷³ His version had slowly become emblematic of a new, more embittered polemic instead – one whose self-critical force had doubly retranslated, in a sense, the romantic nationalism Yeats had first attached to the tragedy’s staging in 1904. As he later explained on BBC Radio, Oedipus seemed to him “representative of human genius”: blinded by belief in his own capacity for governing wisely and aggravated by “involuntary sin,” Oedipus sought answers to ἀνόρθωσον πόλιν (*OT* 46) – “Uplift our State” – to save Thebes’ citizens from plague.¹⁷⁴ The catastrophe of *Oedipus* lay not in the king’s inability to rescue his subjects but rather in his failure to see that the ‘uplift’ he did provide was itself compromised and predicated on a severe and lasting cost: exile, blindness and interne-cine strife. Collective self-deception had reduced the city-state to a wasteland, for in willfully ignoring Oedipus’ history, the Thebans had been

¹⁷¹ Yeats, “To Olivia Shakespear” (December 22, 1921) in Yeats *CLWBY*, entry no. 4039. On leaving the Senate, Yeats felt he had “failed ... and his advice to Pound, ‘Do not be elected to the Senate of your country’, reflects his feeling of inadequacy. Yet his despondency was the product as much of events in Ireland as of any personal failure. His high hopes for the Free State were never fulfilled, and when he relinquished his Senate seat he foresaw only further bitterness for his country.” Cullingford (1981) 165.

¹⁷² Yeats *CW3* (1999) 192. “That Yeats was not alone in his optimism is illustrated by a curious episode in 1924, after the foundation of the Free State, when Oliver St John Gogarty – the surgeon who had received a classical training at Trinity under Mahaffy – launched two swans in the River Liffey and wrote a poem to commemorate the occasion in which the myths of Leda and Fionnula are united. Greece and Ireland were now one.” Macintosh (1994) 15. See Gogarty’s poem, “To the Liffey with Swans,” in Gogarty (2001) 67. On the alleged link between this episode with Yeats’ own poem, “Leda and the Swan,” see O’Connor (1964) 220–21.

¹⁷³ Holloway (1968) 20; Yeats *CL4* (2005) 23.

¹⁷⁴ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 221; Yeats (1966) 810. Yeats’ use of ‘uplift’ recalls, ironically, his derision for ‘moral uplift’ detailed at the beginning of this chapter. See Chapter 3, pp. 123–30.

deceived by a heroic, authoritarian ideal, by a romantic vision whose presence brought home only plague and ruin. In performing that deception in Dublin – in staging what Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) once called the undoing of Oedipus’ *Allessuchende, Allesdeutende* – Yeats perhaps saw something of the same pattern at work in the Free State.¹⁷⁵ For Yeats, the high-minded vision of cultural and political independence espoused during the Revival had, in spite of all, led Ireland’s “popular mind to its own lawless vulgarity.”¹⁷⁶ The nation, like “every country” he thought, had passed “out of automatism” to a new state of “demoralization”;¹⁷⁷ and in this state, Yeats, like many others, failed to inoculate himself against the politics of resentment. An overweening fetish for order saw him give in to an “over-heated” attraction to the authoritarianisms of the early 1930s.¹⁷⁸ The far-right ‘fixed ideas’ of Eoin O’Duffy (1890–1944) would not “promote the rule of the educated classes, nor indeed any of Yeats’ cherished ideals,” but still the presence of the “para-fascism” of the Army Comrades Association, otherwise known as the Irish Blueshirts, allowed the poet to mime the heroic in “a fantasy world of action, drama, and self-aggrandizement, centred on the idea of the Blueshirts.”¹⁷⁹ “Politics are growing heroic,” he told Olivia Shakespear (1863–1938) in 1933: “A Fascist opposition is forming behind the scenes to be ready should some tragic situation develop. I find myself urging the despotic rule of the educated classes as the only end to our troubles. (Let all this sleep in your ear.) I know half a dozen men any one of whom may be Caesar – or Cataline.”¹⁸⁰ The Irish had “no choice but to go on into intelligence,” he thought, and his *Oedipus* was evidence of that turn, he thought: no longer simply Jebb’s “masterpiece of Attic Tragedy,” its translation and performance were proof that a “new satirical comedy” would rise with “a vision of the new Ireland.”¹⁸¹ Though hardened by war and demoralized by various attempts to “rock the cradle of a man of genius,” the ideal of nationhood still appeared heroic: Ireland remained “so full of curiosity, so full of self-criticism ... sometimes so tolerant, sometimes so bitter in its merriment.”¹⁸²

¹⁷⁵ Hölderlin (1804) 107.

¹⁷⁶ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 217.

¹⁷⁷ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 217.

¹⁷⁸ Cullingford (1981) 207.

¹⁷⁹ Cullingford (1981) 204. Foster (2003) 472. On Yeats’ links with the Blueshirts and European fascism, see Cullingford (1981) 197–213 as well as McCormack (2005) and Foster (2003) 468–83.

¹⁸⁰ Yeats, “Letter to Olivia Shakespear, 13 July [1933],” in Yeats *LWBY* (1955) 811–12.

¹⁸¹ Yeats *CW10* (2000) 217; Jebb (1885) v; Yeats *CW10* (2000) 223.

¹⁸² Yeats *CW10* (2000) 216, 223.

The national platform on which Yeats set Attic tragedy – and there debated the struggles of ‘nation-building’ – remained intact in the Irish theatre into the late twentieth century when adaptations of Greek drama slowly began to reflect a “postcolonial sensibility reflective of the cultural and critical priorities of their time.”¹⁸³ “Greek tragedy, with its stark content and spare execution,” no longer existed solely to examine the cultural politics behind bold claims of a national consensus but leapt inward to examine the harsher “social and political realities” of ethnic and religious division within specific communities, principally Ulster.¹⁸⁴ This meant, of course, that the range of the late twentieth-century Irish receptions were not crudely fixated on “oppositions of Britain/Ireland and coloniser/colonised. Other aspects of Irish identity have also been examined, for example constructions of gender and the impact of social change.”¹⁸⁵ Nonetheless, specific Irish adaptations of Sophoclean tragedy did turn to examine more closely ‘provincial’ matters of social unrest and sectarian politics, not merely the “academic and critical discourse which predominated in Irish public life.”¹⁸⁶ Nowhere was this more conspicuous, as Hardwick notes, than in “various attempts in the 1980s to appropriate Sophocles’ *Antigone* to the conflict between Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland.”¹⁸⁷ Yet the usefulness of *Antigone* evolved beyond this moment as well; and by the turn of the twenty-first century – as the violence of the Troubles largely subsided, and as the Irish Republic started to grapple with its place as a member state of the European Union – Sophocles had become more than a ‘provincial’ poet. The reception of *Antigone*, in particular, reflected a preoccupation with collective nostalgia, contemporary international politics and the difficulty of public grieving in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks. Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) translated his version, *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), in this atmosphere, an atmosphere where the representation of “provincial strife” no longer seemed like a pejoratively ‘local’ matter but emblematic rather of an intractable problem, a “global reality” that urgently demanded new witness.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Mahony (2016) 655.

¹⁸⁴ Mahony (2016) 655.

¹⁸⁵ Hardwick (2000) 88.

¹⁸⁶ Mahony (2016) 670.

¹⁸⁷ Hardwick (2000) 88. On the use of *Antigone* in examining questions of provincial dispute, both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, see Macintosh (2011) 90–103; Hardwick (2000) 79–95; Mahony (2016) 667–70; M. McDonald (2000) 16–26; P. McDonald (1995) 183–203, as well as Roche (1988) 221–50.

¹⁸⁸ Mahony (2016) 670.

Ben Barnes, the artistic director of the Abbey Theatre (2000–05), approached Heaney in December 2002 for a translation of the tragedy, thinking Sophocles recomposed by a major Irish writer would be key in commemorating the Theatre's 2004 centenary.¹⁸⁹ Heaney agreed – hoping to set *The Burial at Thebes* against work Yeats had already done. “One person who had not done a version [of *Antigone*] was W. B. Yeats,” he wrote,

Yeats had indeed made for the Abbey Theatre prose translations of Sophocles' other two Theban plays, but with the exception of a few lines entitled “From the ‘Antigone’” (included in his sequence “A Woman Young and Old”), he had not put his trademark on this one. So to that extent at least the road was open.¹⁹⁰

The road was clear, but still from the beginning the question of necessity plagued Heaney. “How many *Antigones* could Irish theatre put up with?” he wondered,

Round about the time the idea was floated, Conall Morrison was touring his adaptation, setting the action in a Middle Eastern context, and a little earlier I had read in manuscript a scholarly and illuminating translation by Professor Marianne McDonald. And if that weren't enough, I had to face the fact that Brendan Kennelly, Tom Paulin and Aidan Carl Mathews had all done their own versions of this particular tragedy, so why take it up again?¹⁹¹

In the intervening years since Yeats' work, Sophocles had become a more domesticated animal in the Irish theatre, his reception and reputation having shifted, perhaps, from that of a controversial, incendiary truth-teller (worthy of censorship) to an approachable poet of socially respectable standing (worthy of appreciation). Moreover, while Yeats' versions, *King Oedipus* (1928) and later *Oedipus at Colonus* (1934), emerged in moments of apparent national urgency, both in Ireland's political history and in the reception history of Sophocles, Heaney's did not have that benefit. With Sophocles as midwife, Yeats had set out to flout censorship, to advance both a nationalist vision and a certain experimentalism in art. Heaney, by contrast, was asked to translate in a moment of a collective nostalgia for the achievements of the Abbey – the “abbeyonehundred” – a theatre that was by then mired in practical mismanagement and deep

¹⁸⁹ Seamus Heaney Literary Papers, 1963–2010, MS 49.493/242. National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

¹⁹⁰ Heaney (2004) 75.

¹⁹¹ Heaney (2004) 75.

financial trouble.¹⁹² As Macintosh observes, Heaney “was writing at the end of a particular tradition and at the dawn of a new one.”¹⁹³ Creatively his *Antigone* was set to mark past glories, not to chart a future vision, a future theatre, nor even to examine the sectarian violence of the Troubles in the way Paulin’s “stone us in the street” *Antigone, The Riot Act* (1985) – or even his *Philoctetes* entitled *The Cure at Troy* (1991) (to say nothing of Heaney’s lyric adaptation of *Oresteia*, “Mycenae Lookout”) – had done years earlier.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, Heaney still felt, as Yeats, Paulin and others had, that translating Sophocles possessed a political urgency beyond mere nostalgia. Translation remained for him “an instrument for political change.”¹⁹⁵ Yet Sophocles no longer seemed especially useful for arbitrating the politics of cultural nationalism. Still Heaney insisted that his *Burial* did indeed provide new ground for political reflection on present-day global strife, namely the “War on Terror” waged by the United States in the years following the attacks of September 2001.¹⁹⁶ Comparing Creon’s intransigence, his desire to punish Antigone for disobedience to the state, with the strong-arm strategies of the Bush administration’s campaign for war in Iraq, Heaney saw the *Antigone* “reenacted in our own world. Just as Creon forced the citizens of Thebes into an either/or situation in relation to Antigone, the Bush administration in the White House was using the same tactic to forward its argument for war on Iraq.”¹⁹⁷ However accurate the parallel may seem at present, the comparison is instructive: it broadly illustrates a complex evolution of Sophoclean reception in the Irish experience and, to a lesser extent, in

¹⁹² Barnes (2008) 246. According to a 2014 report commissioned by Ireland’s Arts Council, the Abbey endured a “major crisis in governance in 2004.” Neither Heaney’s *Antigone* nor Tom Murphy’s translation of Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, managed to save the theatre from coming close to financial insolvency. Despite being advertised to commemorate the centenary, both productions played to what *The Guardian* called “pitiful houses.” The failure to generate much at the box office pushed the theatre’s debt to 1.7 million euros. By the summer of 2005 Ben Barnes and the management board of the Abbey had been forced to resign, the debt of the theatre ballooning to nearly 3.4 million euros. See Arts Council of Ireland (2014) 1; Chrisafis (2004, 2005). See also Jordan and Weitz (2018) 20.

¹⁹³ Macintosh (2011) 102.

¹⁹⁴ Paulin (1985) 10. On Heaney’s attraction to Aeschylus following the 1994 declaration of ceasefire in the North, see especially Lavan (2019) 50–68, as well as Impens (2018) 61–63.

¹⁹⁵ Hardwick (2000) 81.

¹⁹⁶ First published in *The Irish Times* on November 17, 2001, Heaney’s free translation of Horace’s Ode 1.34, “Anything Can Happen,” not only marks the poet’s response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, but is perhaps also the first instance of the more global approach Heaney took in adapting classical literature. Broadly speaking, the Greek and the Roman had clearly become sites for reflection on matters beyond the borders of the Republic and the North. On this translation, see Harrison (2019) 244–62.

¹⁹⁷ Heaney (2004) 76.

English literature at large. As Crawford notes, the evolving vision offered by Irish classicism seemed to slowly provide “a way of moving beyond contemporary national politics,” to challenge the threat of “cultural incest which is an inevitable problem for small nations and communities whether in Ireland, Scotland, Wales or elsewhere.”¹⁹⁸ Thus the translation of the Attic tragedian became no longer a means for compelling stylistic experimentation and the politics of national self-determination. Instead Heaney’s Sophocles became a palimpsest over which the ancient *agon* of Antigone and Creon could be overwritten with a contemporary reflection on matters of international intrigue – a reflection whose rather ‘basic’ English weighed the effects of global terror and new imperial response.

¹⁹⁸ Crawford (2011) 141, 139. See also Impens (2019) 532–37.