



## Réamhrá

le

**Dr. Éamon Ó Ciosáin**

Léiríodh *Breithiúnas* den chéad uair in Amharclann na Péacóige i mBaile Átha Cliath i 1968. Polaiteoir an príomhphearsa sa dráma, fear a chuaigh chun cinn ó aimsir Chogadh na Saoirse. Ábhar tráthúil a bhí ann ar chúpla bealach. Glacadh leis gur laochra a bhí i dtrodairí Chogadh na Saoirse (1919-21); bhí cuid díobh fós gníomhach sa pholaitíocht sna 1960idí. Ach nuair a tharla ceiliúradh i 1966 ar 50 bliain Éirí Amach na Cásca (1916), thosaigh dornán daoine sa deisceart ag ceistiú an fheachtais a bhunaigh stát na hÉireann. Chomh maith leis sin bhí córas eacnamaíochta na hÉireann á oscailt do chomhlachtaí eachtrannacha. Ní raibh an bhéim chéanna níos mó ar neamhspleáchas eacnamaíoch na tíre.

Ach is dócha go raibh cúiseanna eile ar aigne ag Máiréad Ní Ghráda. Bhí taithí aici ar an bpolaitíocht aitiúil mar ba chomhairleoir contae agus náisiúntóir a hathair féin, Séamus Ó Gráda as Contae an Chláir. Bhí aithne aici ar go leor daoine a bhí páirteach sa ghluaiseacht náisiúnach, mar a bhí sí féin, sna blianta idir 1916 agus 1923. D'fhoilsigh sí cnuasach gearrscéalta faoin tréimhse sin (*An Bheirt Deartháir*, 1939). D'oibrigh sí sa pholaitíocht ar feadh tamall gearr ach d'éirigh sí as. Chomh maith leis sin bhí tuairimí láidre aici faoi shaol na hÉireann agus faoin áit a bhí ag mná sa chomhlúadar. Bhí sí tar éis léirmheas láidir a dhéanamh ar stádas na mban i ndráma fada eile, *An Triail* (1964). D'úsáid sí foirm an cheistiúcháin cúirte mar ghléas amharclannaíochta agus tagraíonn na teidil *An Triail* agus *Breithiúnas* don dlí. Tá taithí againn sa lá atá inniu ann ar dhrámaí teilifíse lonnaithe sa chúirt.

Is é an stíl drámaíochta a chleacht Máiréad Ní Ghráda sna drámaí fada ná scéal na bphearsana a bhriseadh suas ina mhíreanna, mar a dhéanann an teilifís go minic. Tarlaíonn radharcanna in áiteanna éagsúla le gur féidir réimse leathan de shaol an duine agus den sochaí a chur ar an stáitse. Mar thoradh air seo taispeánann an pearsa tréithe éagsúla de réir an tsuíomh ina bhfuil sé/sí. Is féidir linn go leor tréithe a fheiceáil i bpríomhphearsa *Breithiúnas*, an polaiteoir Marcas de Grás, sna radharcanna éagsúla. Ach ní drámaíocht

réadúil atá anseo: tá Marcas marbh ó thús an dráma agus é mar bheadh spiorad ag féachaint siar ar a shaol.

D'éirigh le Marcas de Grás sa pholaitíocht trí úsáid a bhaint as go leor cleasanna agus go leor daoine. Thréig sé bean eile a bhí i ngrá agus geallta leis agus phós sé bean ó theaghlach polaitíochta. Tháinig Marcas i dtír ar dhílseacht agus ar obair a rúnaí Síle, a chúntóir Alabhaois agus a lucht leanúna. Duine sotalach, uaibhreach atá ann sa chéad ghníomh. Ach de réir mar a nochtar tuilleadh rúin ina shaol sa dara gníomh, athraíonn sé. Léirítear dó an dochar a rinne sé timpeall air ar feadh a shaoil. Nochtar an bhréag a raibh a shaol polaitiúil ar fad bunaithe air ag deireadh an dráma, eachtra ón gcogadh. Faigheann sé faoiseamh agus tá dóchas aige go maithfear dó.

Pearsa tábhachtach é Alabhaois mar ba é a chuir Marcas ar bhóthar na polaitíochta. Duine soiniúil é, mar a léirítear sa radharc ina léann sé litreacha ó dhaoine ag lorg cúnamh ó Mharcas. Is trí Alabhaois a léirítear fimíneacht na polaitíochta. Duine idéalach í Síle, a chaith a saol ar son Mharcas gan súil le buíochas. Fágtair í ina haonar, neamhphósta sa deireadh. Ach is ina theaghlach féin is mó a léirítear an dochar a rinne an saghas saoil a chaith sé. Ní furasta maireachtáil le Fear Mór. Níor phós iníon Mharcas, Nóra, mar gheall ar an chumhacht a bhí ag a hathair uirthi. Tuigeann a bhean chéile Eilís bréagadóireacht Mharcas, ach ligeann sí uirthi go deireadh nach bhfeiceann sí é. Deir sí gurb é 'buaic na clisteachta do bhean gan a ligean uirthi go bhfuil sí cliste in aon chor'. Ráiteas é seo a thugann le fios go bhfuil mná faoi smacht agus ar bheagán cumhachta. Maidir le beirt mhac Mharcas, téann Seán le dúchas a athar agus iompaíonn Gearóid ina choinne. Is ag freastal ar dhaoine mar dhea a bhí Marcas agus é ag bailiú vótaí. Ach chuaigh Gearóid chun na hAfraice le freastal ar dhaoine i ndáiríre trí obair mhisinéireachta.

Tá go leor pearsana eile sa dráma: úsáideann Máiréad Ní Ghráda mná gan ainm le tráchttaireacht a dhéanamh ar théamaí an dráma. Tá 'An Fear Eile', *alter ego* Mharcas, b'fhéidir, mar a bheadh fear faoistine nó teiripe, ag tarraingt na fírinne as Marcas tríd síos. D'fhéadfaí a rá gur teachtaireachtaí sách duairc atá ag an dráma: go maireann an dochar a dhéanann daoine ina ndiaidh agus go ndeachaigh leithéidí Mharcas chun cinn ar chostas na mban go háirithe. Ach sa deireadh fágann Máiréad Ní Ghráda faoin lucht féachana breithiúnas a thabhairt ar an bhfianaise atá curtha os a gcomhair.



## Introduction

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*Breithiúnas* was first staged in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, in 1968. The central character is a bogus War of Independence hero who has risen through political life on the basis of his freedom-fighter past. He has prospered at the expense of his family and particularly the women around him. The play's background is one of grubby local politics, jobbery and half-truths cynically spun in political speeches, resulting in a trenchant critique of Irish society in general on the part of the author. The immediate context for Ní Ghráda's choice of theme may well have been the questioning in the 1960s of the struggle for independence and the abandonment by the Dublin government of economic nationalism. However, she probably had more specific sources of inspiration for the play, although she did not leave any statement of them on record.

Ní Ghráda had first hand knowledge of local politics in her native Clare as her father James, a nationalist, had been a county councillor. She also had experience of national politics through her involvement in the Gaelic League and Cumann na mBan in the 1919-21 troubles. She then worked as secretary to the politician Ernest Blythe, a position she left after a short period. Indeed, the topics of the Civil War and the position of women in Irish society appear elsewhere in her literary works. Her most well-known work, the tragedy *An Triail*, (1964) presents the case of a single mother and like *Breithiúnas*, refers to the legal process through its title. Questioning of characters occurs in a court-like scenario. Both plays take a sharply critical look at behaviour and conventions in Irish society; both also present universal themes.

Short, fast-moving scenes rather like television drama characterise Ní Ghráda's dramatic style. It is non-realistic in *Breithiúnas* in that the central character is dead before the play begins. He either observes the living or relives scenes from his life, in a thematic sequence rather than from beginning to end. The departure from constraints of time and space allows the author to develop more characteristics of the central character and to sketch a broad

social canvas. Once removed by death from exercising his power over those around him, he is forced to confront his half-truths and untruths and ultimately his own truth.

Marcas de Grás rose in politics thanks to his personal legend, which his sidekick, Alabhaois, a former fighting comrade grown cynical after years of politicking, promotes. He uses people and openly despises them (see the final speech of Gníomh 1). As the scenes unfold, his pride and ambition gradually yield and he begins to see the damage he has done around him throughout his career. After his various betrayals and political strokes are presented, the play ends with an expression of hope for rest from his vain striving, if not forgiveness for his deeds. Doubt remains however about the cause of his death from the gunshot which opens the play.

As Shakespeare wrote in *Julius Caesar*, 'the evil that men do lives after them'. This is expressed in Irish in the play and is particularly evident regarding the women in Marcas' life. He jilted his first love in order to marry Eilís, partly if not mainly for her political connections. She sees through his ambition but supports him, even as he cavorts with the nurse who cares for her in her final illness. Marcas' daughter Nóra and his secretary Síle both remain unmarried as a result of his power over them. Both idealise him and contribute selflessly to his career, leading to sarcasm and misunderstanding on the part of others. The two sons provide a contrast: Seán, the son Marcas shaped in his image, the hard-nosed businessman who plans ahead as soon as he reads Marcas' will and Gearóid, who refused to serve Marcas' overbearing ambition. Whereas Marcas 'served' people in order to garner votes, Gearóid emigrates to work as a lay missionary in Africa, serving people in a different and altruistic way.

While Alabhaois could be said to be Marcas' cynical shadow, another shadow character, An Fear Eile, functions like a confessor or therapist, prodding and probing Marcas as he confronts the sum of his life's deeds. Ní Ghráda uses other anonymous characters to provide commentary on the characters and the themes of the play. Flashbacks, retorts, dialogues of the deaf (as in Marcas' inability to speak to the living) and other dramatic devices are used. Irony and the revelation of contradictions between the private and public spheres are widespread in the play; they highlight the themes of hypocrisy, dishonesty in politics, the exploitation of women and the misuse of power. Marcas seeks peace at the end, or perhaps still the chancer, hopes for a final reprieve. Having presented the evidence, Máiréad Ní Ghráda leaves it to the audience to judge.

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