The stuff of tragedy? Representations of Irish political leaders in the ‘Haughey’ plays of Carr, Barry and Breen

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Plays which deal directly with political life are rare in the Irish canon. Mostly, the emphasis is on family relations, with the direct political context placed in the background, if not almost entirely effaced. But there are those exceptional occasions when contemporary playwrights have felt the need to address the state of the nation more directly by placing politicians squarely on the stage. Brian Friel did so in his 1969 play *The Mundy Scheme*, with its mendacious Taoiseach F.X. Ryan and his scheme to repopulate the west of Ireland by filling it with the dead bodies of rich foreigners; and in 1982's *The Communication Cord* the equally corrupt Senator Donovan mouths as hypocritical pieties many of the views of Irish identity seriously promulgated two years earlier in *Translations*: ‘This determined our first priorities! This is our native simplicity! Don’t give me that shit!’¹ Both plays were unusual in Friel’s *oeuvre* in being ferocious satires; neither did well commercially or critically, neither has been much revived (if at all) and *The Mundy Scheme* is not currently in print.

In 1982, Hugh Leonard followed his autobiographical plays of the 1970s, *Da* and *A Life*, with his black comedy, *Kill*, whose central politician Wade is a thinly disguised version of then-Taoiseach Charles Haughey. Leonard’s play was neither a critical nor commercial success. With such antecedents it can hardly have been on commercial grounds that in the concentrated period of 2002–03 three Irish playwrights staged dramas which centred on a political leader who bore in varying degrees a recognisable resemblance to Charles J. Haughey (1926–2006): Marina Carr’s *Ariel* (2002), Sebastian Barry’s *Hinterland* (2002) and John Breen’s *Charlie* (2003).² At the time, Haughey had been out of power

for a decade and was in bad health. What brought his name back into the headlines was the series of tribunals then under way which summoned a wide range of politicians, builders and businessmen who had prospered during the Haughey era. The primary purpose of the tribunals was to inquire into the possibility of financial links between the politicians and the businessmen, either in the form of direct financial donations or of re-zoning decisions for property development which signally altered the value of land. A particular area of investigation was possible connections between Irish politicians and offshore accounts designed to evade the payment of taxes. When Haughey himself was summoned to appear before the Moriarty Tribunal, he insisted he knew little of such matters, since he left the handling of his financial affairs to his advisor Desmond Traynor. Pressed further on the matter, Haughey claimed, in Justin O'Brien's words, 'limited mental recall'.³ In the face of this repeated assertion and Haughey's declining health (the cancer which subsequently claimed him), there was a tacit agreement not to call the former Taoiseach before any further tribunals.

This daily drama in the courts may well have prompted a degree of soul-searching on behalf of the playwrights, a decision to take the measure and probe the state of health of the body politic in the new millennium. As Sebastian Barry argued when defending his writing of *Hinterland*: 'these people [politicians] are part of us . . . It is not possible to step away from them now that they are disgraced. Even as a principle of self-preservation, we should realise we're shooting off a part of our own body. The thing has to be healed rather than cut off.'⁴ By the late 1990s the unprecedented national confidence which accompanied the financial buoyancy of the Celtic Tiger prompted a greater degree of soul-searching. In deciding to establish the Tribunals, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern stated that their purpose was 'to address serious allegations of corruption in the political and business spheres', emphasising that their job was 'to get at the truth and to reveal all to the public so that faith in the political process is restored and that people can again have confidence in their politicians'.⁵ Such a process of self-examination on the part of the Republic was bound to focus on the figure of Charles J. Haughey, since nobody more embodied the contradictions at the heart of the transformation of the old Ireland – the frugal comfort and rural self-sufficiency advocated by Eamonn de Valera – into the new – the thrusting economic self-confidence which finally replaced emigration with immigration. In his charisma and self-image, Haughey radiated confidence and a sense of manifest destiny; he showed that an Irish Catholic could just as easily lord it over a grand estate as any Protestant landlord and that an Irish Taoiseach could take

an equal place at the European high table of the new confederation of countries. But this image of munificent success was projected by Haughey during the decades when the country itself was running up huge debt and the workers were being urged to exercise self-restraint with regard to their demand for wage increases. How, it was increasingly asked, could Haughey maintain such a life-style on a mere politician's salary? Haughey's style of leadership encouraged either unquestioning loyalty or determined opposition, not just in the country as a whole but more critically within the Fianna Fáil party itself. On the three occasions during the 1980s where he went to the country seeking an overall mandate, he never achieved it, and was always forced into some kind of political coalition to survive. But that division itself reflected a country divided between the conservative and the modernising impulses, as the roughly fifty-fifty votes in all the various referenda (on divorce and abortion) demonstrated. The advent of the Celtic Tiger posed the question most sharply: was Haughey the political visionary who made possible the growth of such prosperity or was he the ruthless pragmatist whose vanity held back such progress until he was no longer a political force? The model which suggested itself, as much on the political as on the theatrical stage, was the figure of the Shakespearean tragic hero. Was Haughey a great man brought down by the machinations of his political enemies, a figure of great intelligence and talent betrayed by a singular flaw in that same nature, or a small man devoted to the street tactics of survival and deluded by his own hubris?

When Haughey stepped down from the office of Taoiseach in 1992, he did so by quoting from *Othello*: 'I have done the state some service, and they know't; / No more of that.'⁶ Appropriately, therefore, all three plays make frequent allusion to tragedy, especially Shakespearean, and the Shakespearean parallel/context is one I will pursue in this chapter. The tragic overtones in which Barry's fictional Taoiseach dresses himself are at times supported by the play, but equally at times undercut by satiric and farcical passages. Marina Carr's portrait of a contemporary politician has distinct echoes of Greek as well as Shakespearean tragedy; its mix of the mythic and the contemporary are its most daring stylistic feature, and also its most unstable. Both plays deal with their subject through an almost exclusive emphasis on the family romance. Breen in opting for a more broadly social and satirical perspective would appear to have sidestepped some of the complications they encounter; but the more direct representation in *Charlie* of scenes from Irish political life has to contend with the wide range of archive material available to the documentary makers. All three plays depend

on a degree of knowledge of events from the last forty years of Irish political life which is virtually unprecedented in the canon.

What most surprised me when I saw *Hinterland* was the extent and degree of the parallels between Barry's fictional Johnny Silvester and Charles J. Haughey. Much of the hostility the play attracted was charged to the closeness of the parallel, as being 'too personal'. Both in 2002 were men in their seventies, recent Taoisigh living in ostentatious Georgian mansions in north Dublin. Both have had a strong measure of success in their long, chequered careers but are now facing daily denunciation in the newspapers. There are repeated calls to appear before tribunals investigating ethical and legal questions relating to political leaders and their sources of income. Vincent Browne, in his time as editor of the current affairs magazine *Magill*, persistently raised questions about the means by which Haughey had acquired his vast and ostentatiously displayed wealth, particularly as he came from a family of modest means; not only did Browne keep asking it for over twenty years but he set it as a challenge to every young reporter who wanted to work for him. The same question is put to Silvester by a young UCD student who interviews him in Act II of Barry's *Hinterland*. His reply that he is not a rich man and has handled very little money leads into a sophistic speech talking about certain expenditures that were written off: 'There was, until recently, an understanding that occasional exceptional spending might go on this bill, and it was accepted that these things might now and then be quite large, especially when I was head of the country.'⁷ Three other figures surrounding Silvester consolidate the Haughey parallels. To begin with, there is his wife Daisy, the daughter of a former leader, as Maureen Haughey was the daughter of the first modernising Taoiseach, Sean Lemass. When Silvester remarks '[t]hey didn't begrudge him his achievements, political and financial', Daisy replies: 'Dad was the soul of probity, Johnny' (p. 19). Another voice which regularly rebukes Silvester in the course of the play is his former friend and colleague, Cornelius. The details of Cornelius's failed attempt to become President of Ireland, losing out to 'a bloody woman president, with her selfless bloody tone' (p. 39), and of a failed kidney operation to rectify his diabetes, echo Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Lenihan to a nicety. The ghost of Cornelius appears like a Jacob Marley from beyond the grave to his former crony, to sound the note of betrayal that, when his political adversaries came looking for a head, Silvester handed them Cornelius's. Silvester's mistress, Connie, appears late in the second act to try to revive the relationship. Connie is a journalist who, when reminded that she sold their story (with incriminating photos) to the newspapers, as her prototype Terry

Keane had done,⁸ remarks ‘A girl has to make a living somehow’ (p. 71).

But there is one key element of the play which bears no particular relationship to Charles Haughey, so far as one is aware, and that is the father–son relationship between Silvester and the manic-depressive Jack. Such evidence as we see would tend to support Daisy’s contention that Silvester was never any kind of father to his young son while he was off being father to the nation. In a play generally notable for its lack of action, the arrival of Jack into the darkened drawing-room in the middle of the night and his attempted hanging appear to come from a different play. As Colm Tóibín has put it: ‘In scene after scene, the connections between the Silvesters and the Haugheys had been made abundantly clear. Now the script had departed from the story of the Haugheys to tell another story, one of grief and estrangement and the damage fathers cause to their sons.’⁹ All Jack’s father can manage to do when he is helping to pick his son up from the floor after the failed suicide attempt is to hit him with literary quotations: ‘All manner of things will be well. “The woods decay, the woods decay and fall. . . .” You remember your Tennyson, eh?’ (p. 44). And when Jack responds ‘After many a summer. Can’t bear it, Daddy’, Silvester’s inappropriately humorous reply is ‘Things fall apart, the ceiling cannot hold’.

The question of the play’s mixed status – whether it is a dramatised version of Haughey’s history or of a dysfunctional father–son relationship – is further raised by the question of genre. What kind of play is it? Silvester has no doubt that he is a Shakespearean tragic hero, muttering early on the line ‘I have done the state some service’ from Othello’s closing speech to those who have arrested him and who intend to bring him to justice. Haughey made his own departure from the Dáil in 1992 with the selfsame lines. But Silvester goes further along the path of self-mythologisation with frequent quotations from *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.¹⁰ The question is: to what extent are these consciously quoted lines confirmed or denied by the play? The treatment of Silvester by Barry is not so much an undermining as a complex layering. In relation to *Hamlet*, Silvester more often resembles the figure of Claudius, a usurper with a questionable claim to the throne who has to deal with a suicidal son. As he puts it, appropriating Hamlet’s lines about Claudius to himself: ‘I will smile and smile and be a holy villain’ (p. 83). The tragic overtones and parallels with *Hamlet* are at one level confirmed by the attempted suicide of young Jack, but structurally the scene teeters on the verge of farce. The farcical tone returns with a vengeance when the mistress Connie and Silvester are surprised by the unexpected return of Daisy and Jack. He beckons her to hide in a cupboard:

CONNIE (*indignant*): In here? This is not a bedroom farce, Johnny.

JOHNNY: Well, this is not a bedroom; it is a State Papers cupboard.
(p. 75)

The confrontation scene which follows clarifies why Barry has risked the tragic aura by pushing the play so much in the direction of farce. He requires that the father-son scenario reach its climax by this route, with the son (who has all along maintained that he loves his father despite his mother's accusations) being made complicit in the hypocrisy of the sexual cover-up:

Daddy, I know this woman. I met her with you. Train station, when I was seventeen. 'You are a man of the world, Jack', you said. 'Don't mention this to your mother.' (p. 77)

The one area in the play where its concerns most come together is in relation to the North of Ireland, a crucial area which any play based on Haughey must confront. In the opening moments of *Hinterland*, Silvester is writing a letter to his two aunts in Derry, 'where so many of my childhood memories reside' (p. 7). This is biographically true of the Haughey family, who moved from Derry to Dublin when Charles was a youngster. They did so for economic reasons, as so many from the North did, but also because Haughey's father had a strong Republican history. Haughey's Northern background is less well known than other aspects of his biography, in part because he rarely discussed it and because the rural area in Ireland to which he gravitated was the Blaskets, where he could live like a Gaelic chieftain in exile on his own private island. The 'Hinterland' of the title has a number of references: in the satiric mode, it is a crude metaphor for the ageing body of the Taoiseach and to the prostate problems with which he is afflicted; in the shared reminiscences of Silvester and Cornelius, it connotes the emergence from their Mercedes to the hand-pumping and tea-drinking as they campaigned through the backroads of Ireland. In more general terms, it can be taken to refer to the questionable moral hinterland Haughey inhabited in his career. But its deepest resonance, because it is the point in this discordant play where the personal and the political fuse, is the way in which Donegal functions as a hinterland for the Catholics of Derry. As Silvester puts it, 'my mind often returns to the poignant fact that Derry was once the market town for a much greater district, before partition divided the old city from her own hinterland of Donegal' (p. 7). As he goes on to remark, 'my father was hardly the same man after partition'. And though the ghost of Silvester's father does not stalk directly through this play, he is evoked in Silvester's mind

by the ghost of Cornelius, tellingly in relation to the hunger strikers of 1980. Silvester retorts:

let us have no bullshit now, here at the edge of the world, for God's sake. Alright. When the hunger strikers started to die, one by one, [. . .] I knew my heart was compromised. I felt my father turning – painfully – in his grave.' (p. 64)

In the end, looking on what he has become through all of his compromises and how he stands in relation to his departed wife and son, Silvester utters his most hollow boast: 'I will live, I will live for ever, like a fucking vampire!' (p. 83). This is not a direct quotation, as so often with Silvester, but it manages to exhume the memorable lines penned by Conor Cruise O'Brien in relation to Haughey's career-long succession of political comebacks. Reflecting on the number of occasions on which Haughey's political career was declared over before he staged yet another resurrection, O'Brien wrote: 'Even if Charles Haughey were to be laid out at a crossroads, and a stake driven through his heart – I speak metaphorically, of course – I'd still wear a sprig of garlic, just in case.'¹¹

Tragic or Gothic? This is the mix which much more clearly defines Marina Carr's *Ariel*. The tragic is particularly dominant in a work where, in its account of an ambitious politician who sacrifices his sixteen-year-old daughter to gain power, there is a strong debt to Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Carr's play covers a time-span of over ten years. It tracks Fermoy Fitzgerald from the night before the election in a tightly fought contest with his opposite Hannafin, the night of Ariel's sixteenth birthday on which her father takes her on a fatal ride in the brand new car he has bought for her, through to a period ten years later when, in a television interview, Fermoy discusses his meteoric rise to political success, his record of achievement in three government ministries, and his ambition to be Taoiseach. This is also the night on which he will be killed by his Clytemnestra, his wife Frances, when she discovers what he has done to their daughter. The third act extends the time span posthumously with the return of Fermoy's ghost, still searching for a reunion with his dead daughter. The mix of the mythic and the contemporary is the play's most daring stylistic feature, and also its most unstable, in terms of the relationship between the two. This is a recognisably contemporary Ireland, more so than in many of Carr's other plays, with a Celtic Tiger family that has prospered from the success of its cement factory, which can now afford to send its children to university and to buy them brand new cars for their sixteenth birthdays. But it is also a world where incest and murder are part of the family legacy, where

the ghost of a dead child can talk to her father from the bottom of a lake, and where a contemporary politician can speak of his one-to-one relationship with God.¹² The play could be said to be probing the contemporary political unconscious here. The overt emphasis in public debate is on economic development while the sub-structure of religious belief which still underpins the Irish state remains unaddressed or even acknowledged. At this level the play is enacting a return of the repressed, of those atavistic impulses which are the more insatiable because denied.

The lengthy television interview Fermoy gives at the start of Act II is the most realistic/satiric in the play and, in the detail given of the three government ministries, provides the greatest opportunities for locating parallels in the contemporary Irish political scene. The first was Fermoy's period in Arts and Culture, a ministry that was established a bare ten years previous during a Fine Gael/Labour coalition, when the Labour Party's Michael D. Higgins was the first to occupy the newly created post. It has since been filled twice by Fianna Fáil, with Sile de Valera and currently John O'Donoghue. The Ministry of Arts and Culture has picked up more portfolios along the way, incorporating the Islands and the Gaeltacht during de Valera's period in office, and adding Sports under O'Donoghue. With each addition there has been a corresponding diminution of emphasis on the arts. When *Ariel* was premiered at the Abbey Theatre in October 2002, the closest anyone came to a one-on-one identification was to suggest some resemblance between Fermoy Fitzgerald and Michael D. Higgins. Both had been Ministers for Arts and Culture; both identified themselves as visionaries and engaged in an attack on the 'gombeen man' mentality in Irish politics. But Higgins has published several volumes of poetry and is well up on Irish writing, whereas Fermoy declares that the arts 'was an area I knew very little about when I took over the brief. I used look up to artists and poets before I got to know em. It was a great education to realize they're as fickle and wrongheaded as the rest of us.'¹³ As the interviewer notes, Fermoy went on to become Minister of Finance after Arts and Culture and, if he is to be believed, '[my] term in Finance was one of the most successful in the history of the State' (p. 39). Those who wish to make a case for the positive political achievements of Charles J. Haughey often point to his term as Minister of Finance in the late 1960s. For it was Haughey in Finance who brought in the legislation, unique among European countries, whereby a writer deemed to be an artist may live in the country without paying taxes on their earnings from their writings, no matter how large (or small). So it remains over three decades later that every Irish playwright, whatever their views on Haughey,

continues to benefit financially from his legislation. In addition, while Haughey was Taoiseach, his artistic advisor Anthony Cronin set up Aosdána, an association of artists, most of whom are able to avail of an annual tax-free salary on the basis of being writers. Charles Haughey's treatment of artists – not only in a financial sense but in the prominence and importance he attached to them as part of civic and cultural life – may be seen as an example of enlightenment. But in the context of the tribunals and of the general aura of corruption and sleaze now associated with him the question emerges as to what extent Haughey has bought off the artists of Ireland; to what extent and degree the playwrights who have benefited – and they all have – are mired and implicated in the same financial double standards which the former Taoiseach promoted. This troubling question may well lie behind the emergence of Haughey on the stages of Irish theatre in 2002 and 2003. That tax-free status which was Haughey's legacy to the writers of Ireland is under pressure from the European Union, where it is anomalous and without precedent in relation to the tax laws of all of the other member states, and has had to be vigorously defended by those writers in the run-up to recent budgets. In general, the liberal intelligentsia has welcomed the pressure brought by the European High Court on Irish legal practice in relation to such issues as the decriminalisation of homosexuality; their own tax-free status is another matter.

Traces of Haughey can be seen in Carr's Fermoy, not just as a former successful Minister of Finance, but in the delusions of grandeur they both share. Brendan Behan memorably defined an Anglo-Irishman as a Protestant on a horse and the iconic and much reproduced photo of Haughey, sitting on his horse outside his Kinsealy estate, shows how much he cast himself in the role of Anglo-Irish squire. In frequently having an Irish poet at his side, he clearly saw himself as a combination of an Irish chieftain and a Renaissance prince. On his foreign travels, he stood squarely beside Japanese emperors and European monarchs as equal to the best of them. In the late lamented *Scrap Saturday*, a weekly satiric radio series on RTE, the self-mythologising aspect of Haughey was brilliantly captured in Dermot Morgan's monologues, where Haughey would adapt his family genealogy to whatever country and potentate he happened to be visiting. In Haughey's political career, he frequently invoked the emperor Napoleon as exemplar and equal. And so when Fermoy places himself in the company of Napoleon, as he does on more than one occasion in *Ariel* – 'Dreamt last nigh I was dinin wud Alexander the Greah, Napoleon and Caesar' (p. 14) – the resonances with Haughey are unmistakable. There is no clear parallel for Fermoy's third government ministry, Education, except to observe that

of the many incumbents over the years, not one has gone on to be Taoiseach – as clear a prophecy as any that neither will Fermoy, as he hopes.

The first act also casts considerable doubt over whether Fermoy will win the local election. His long-standing opponent Hannafin defeated him the last time out, although only by four votes, as Fermoy reiterates. Hannafin drops by and urges Fermoy to withdraw by hinting at the dirt he will sell to the papers to tarnish his opponent, not least the fact that ‘there’s a few inquiries to be med as to how the cement and gravel empire goh off of the ground’ (p. 34). In the Act II interview, which confirms that Fermoy beat Hannafin, there’s the suggestion he did so by disclosing scandal about his opponent.

VERONA . . . didn’t you rise in proportion to Hanaffin’s fall?

FERMOY A cuurse I did, but thah doesn’t diminish divine grace. If that scandal had broken a week laher, Hannafin would’ve kept hees seat.

VERONA There were suggestions at the time, Minister, that you were instrumental in the breaking of that scandal.

FERMOY Malicious gossip. (p. 38)

Fermoy goes on to rest his case on the fact that ‘I was elected fair and square by the people’ (p. 39). But in the Midlands dialect Carr has made her own, the merely rhetorical ‘of course’ is transformed into ‘a cuurse’, a more potent form of word magic. Even in the short extract just quoted, Fermoy refers to his belief that ‘divine grace’ was operative.

There is a huge area of this play to be explored in terms of its belief systems; and having concentrated on the political side of the play for the purposes of this chapter, I can do no more than touch on it. But if Fermoy claims that he is merely following God’s plan in sacrificing his daughter Ariel, the question remains: what God? The theistic issue is raised by his wife Frances when she accuses Fermoy of the murder in Act II. But it emerges even more powerfully in Act I, when he is still contemplating the deed and is discussing it with his brother, the monk Boniface. There is some suggestion that in a Yeatsian sense the Christian dispensation is at an end and what will succeed is the ‘rough beast’, when Fermoy invokes a ‘blood-dimmed tide’:

FERMOY . . . I’ll give him [God] whah he wants for ud’s hees in the first place anyway.

BONIFACE And whah is ud he wants?

FERMOY I tould ya, blood and more blood, blood till we're dry as husks,
then pound us down, spread us like salt on the land, begin
the experiment over, on different terms next time.

BONIFACE We've moved beyond the God a Job, Fermoy. (p. 19)

This invocation of Job is the only Old Testament reference in *Ariel*; but in a biblical context where Abraham is called upon to sacrifice his son Isaac the reference provides a worldview in which human sacrifice to the deity can be considered. The primary reference would appear to be the Greeks where, even though the play retains the singular reference, what is being talked about is 'the gods', those figures who take a particularly delight in intervening in human affairs and toying with the destinies of human individuals. But it is quite a task to translate these concepts into contemporary Ireland and I am not sure the play succeeds in doing so. If there is no endorsement of Fermoy's views by the play, then he is a raving megalomaniac, a psychotic creature beyond the reach of the other characters and our belief or sympathy. If there are gods to whom contemporary Irish politicians have sacrificed in order to achieve their worldly success, then I am not convinced that addressing them in borrowed Greek robes, in terms that are not fully translated into the post-Catholic Ireland of the twenty-first century, is the best or most dramatically effective way to present them.¹⁴

In 2003, the year following Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* and Carr's *Ariel*, the dramatisation of the life and career of the former Taoiseach was taken a stage further by playwright John Breen in *Charlie*. As the play's title indicates, there is no longer a fictional veneer or melange of identities in the representation of the title character. From the outset, the names and references indicate that this is a play about Haughey. In the play, as in life, he is surrounded by the politicians who aided him in his efforts to become party leader of Fianna Fáil and who are readily identifiable by their last names: Pádraig Flynn, Sean Doherty, Albert Reynolds, Brian Lenihan. A ubiquitous presence is Haughey's press secretary, P.J. Mara, the original spin doctor, whose tendency to refer to Haughey as 'Boss' owes as much to the mythologising of the satirical series *Scrap Saturday* as it does to fact. Breen's play is not a family play, as were those by Barry and Carr; the political narrative is not being filtered through the family tragedy. Instead, *Charlie* concentrates on the dimension of Haughey's life and career that were singularly absent from the other two plays: the public life, the campaigning for political office, the backstage intrigue. Karen Fricker remarked on the difference in her *Guardian* review: 'Wisely, Breen focuses exclusively on Haughey's political life (it was dramatising the man's personal affairs that got Barry

into hot water).'¹⁵ The retrospect on his career is framed by a visit Haughey makes in the present of 2003 to the Mayo farm of a man called Michael, whose uncle he had known some decades before. In a play where every character seems to have a real-life prototype, this scenario does not immediately suggest one. The uncle who was forced to back off from taking a legal case against the local Fianna Fáil TD stands in for any number of anonymous plain people of Ireland who felt betrayed by Haughey's failure to deliver on his promises of supporting them against the vested interests; he is also used to evoke Haughey's treatment of his close friend Brian Lenihan when he dismissed him from public office.

The retrospect on Haughey does not go back to the beginning of his political career: the period in the 1960s when he first came to prominence as an enterprising minister in several portfolios in Sean Lemass's government. Instead, it kicks off with the immediate aftermath of the Arms Trial debacle in 1970, a low point from which there would seem to be no recovery. *Charlie* benefits from the lateness of its composition by fully addressing the Tribunals of the late 1990s where the mysterious sources of Haughey's wealth were placed under sustained scrutiny. Between these two low points the play charts in a number of key scenes the upward trajectory and process by which Haughey fought his way back from the political wilderness to become leader of Fianna Fáil and to head up several government administrations. The decade from 1970, when he was fired from Jack Lynch's government, to 1980, when he replaced Lynch as party leader and as Taoiseach in an internal putsch, were characterised in the RTE/Mint Productions four-part TV documentary, *Haughey*,¹⁶ as the years of the 'chicken and ham' circuit. During those years, Haughey travelled the length and breadth of the land in order to attend innumerable local party dinners, to press the flesh and to build a countrywide network of personal allegiances and support that would back him in the subsequent heave for power. The process is wonderfully crystallised in a scene in *Charlie* where he is primed by P.J. Mara as he works the room:

CHARLIE: Where are we?

P.J.: Ballyokane. This is Richard Murphy. Runs a piggery. Wife's a singer with the musical society.

CHARLIE: Richard, good to meet you again. How're the pigs? Remember, Ireland will always need bacon. Did I see your wife on the television?

CHARLIE moves around the room.¹⁷

He then encounters a man who is identified with the Jack Lynch camp and whose son has been barred from playing hurling. Charlie promises

the man something he has not asked for – that his son will get to play in the hurling final – and thanks him for ‘taking a risk’ by coming out to support him – something the man has not declared. We are deep in the political land of wink and nod, or (as the play calls it elsewhere) the territory ‘of implication and innuendo’ (p. 41), where the absence of outright statement opens up the rich possibilities of ambiguity. Breen’s play is alert to how language and its manipulation were central to the Haughey years and is at its best when it exploits this awareness.

The play is also alert to Haughey’s contradictions as the title character undergoes a series of metamorphoses. Through the 1970s, by working the ‘chicken and ham’ circuit, Haughey consciously identified himself with the rural core values of the Fianna Fáil party, and in particular the farmers. But Haughey had made his mark in the 1960s and come to national attention as a moderniser, one of the new breed of Young Turks who were resolutely urban and forward-looking, who based their appeal (and their bid for power) on their alliance with Sean Lemass, an alliance cemented in Haughey’s case by his marriage to Lemass’s daughter, Maureen. The 1970s saw him build a contradictory rural persona, a role ironically more akin to the traditionalism of de Valera than the modernising of Lemass, as he toured the country and increasingly came to be photographed against the natural beauty of County Kerry and the island he purchased off its coast. It was inevitable that when he was returned to power those rural values would be betrayed; and this is the burden of Michael’s charge against him in the play’s present. If Haughey can claim (as he does) that he regarded Michael’s uncle ‘as the pulse of the Party, of the Nation’ (p. 36), then the accusation when it comes has all the more moral force: ‘He [the uncle] said last year that you were wrong to fire Brian Lenihan. . . . You fired your best friend as Taoiseach’ (p. 62).

Another contradiction that Breen’s play is well placed to explore, given the evidence of the tribunals, is the increasing gap between Haughey’s modest origins and the grandiose lifestyle while in office, the Charvet shirts and Le Coq Hardi restaurant. Throughout *Charlie*, and particularly when he is out of office, Haughey has scenes with his bankers, who insist that he come to terms with his ever-accumulating debts while he persists in borrowing ever larger sums. The first banker points out that Haughey’s ‘debts are spiralling out of control’ and that he ‘is living beyond his means’ (p. 11), while the second offers the defence (Haughey’s own) that he ‘is a very popular politician’ who ‘has connections with some of the wealthiest individuals in this state’ (p. 12). Haughey’s financial affairs run through the play, bringing in a supporting

cast of financial advisers, wealthy businessmen and bankers. The final pay-off is the large sum donated by supermarket magnate Ben Dunne to Haughey, the only donation given as a direct cheque and therefore traceable. When Dunne's solicitor points out that the money ended up in Haughey's bank account, Haughey's defence speaks equally of manifest destiny and dodgy hubris:

I was the Taoiseach, I didn't receive money like a vagrant. . . . I was running the country, the European Union. I couldn't be walking around without an arse in my trousers. . . . I was the Taoiseach. History is going to judge me. Ben Dunne is a fucking shopkeeper. (p. 74)

If Haughey spent the 1970s cultivating his role as man of the people, he displayed his wealth in the guise of an Anglo-Irish grandee, inhabiting the 'Big House' at Kinsealy, riding to hounds, buying expensive artworks and breeding greyhounds. Here was one of the colonised asserting his independence by mimicking the dress and behaviour of the former colonising power. This role-playing reached some kind of apotheosis when as Taoiseach he presented a Georgian silver teapot to the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, at their first meeting. The scene is memorably represented in *Charlie*. Mara objects to the gift as a token of abject forelock-tugging, since it looks as if Charlie is 'going cap in hand' (p. 36). Haughey's defence is that the gesture betokens equality rather than colonial mimicry. But he goes further by charging P.J. that he does not understand women. Margaret Thatcher is the only female character in the play. With the domestic eliminated, neither Haughey's wife nor his mistress gets a dramatic look-in. But Breen plays up the extent to which Haughey is casting this meeting between the prime ministers of two sovereign states in heavily gendered terms as the romantic wooing of a woman by a man. As he declares to an adviser who suggests he brings index cards on the subjects he and Thatcher are to discuss, 'I have never needed help creating the right atmosphere with a woman' (p. 38). It is not the first time that Anglo-Irish relations have been figured as those between a man and a woman, but significantly Haughey here reverses the traditional identifications by casting Ireland in the role of the male. The musk generated by their encounter may well help to explain the subsequent debacle when their non-exchange on the future of Northern Ireland was translated afterwards by spokesman Brian Lenihan into the claim that 'the north's constitutional position was [now] up for discussion' (p. 41) and that 'it could mean a united Ireland in ten years' (p. 43). If there are contradictions between the urban and the rural in Haughey's persona (or personae), between the man of the people and the Anglo-Irish

gentleman, the most confounding element of all is the most deeply buried: the Republican passion about the fate of the North bequeathed by his Derry origins and his father's politics. Haughey's relationship with Thatcher foundered on the fact that 'I always thought that I, I was the man that would sort out the North. From the start of it' (p. 44). When Thatcher and Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald brokered the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, Haughey opposed it and was bitterly criticised for so doing.

When the Ben Dunne revelations (which Haughey had persistently denied) forced him to leave office and resign, he did so by quoting from Othello's closing speech; 'I have done the state some service, and they know't; / No more of that.'¹⁸ But the context hardly seems applicable. Othello has just murdered his wife. To those surrounding Haughey in the Fianna Fáil party, the threat he posed was not so much to their lives as to their livelihoods, as TD Charlie McCreevy (one of the non-supporters) put it in the *Haughey* documentary. His self-consciously theatrical exit speech is consciously recalled in the closing moments of Breen's play. His Charlie glosses the act of identification with Shakespeare's tragic hero as follows: 'Othello was a great man brought down by his baser instincts' (p. 79). Michael, who says he has read the play for his Leaving Certificate exam, ripostes that he 'was thinking of Iago' and the admonition 'Put money in thy purse' as the more apposite. But the Shakespeare play which most proliferates intertextually in *Charlie* is *Julius Caesar*. Charlie himself, in recalling his meeting with Margaret Thatcher, invokes the figure of Caesar and his 'great campaigns' (p. 43) to lament the fact that 'I would never be tested on a great stage'. The references to the play itself are most prominent when he and his backers are considering the heave against Jack Lynch. To P.J. Mara's query as to whether it is too soon, Haughey responds: 'There is a tide [in the affairs of men,] which taken at the flood leads on to Fortune' (p. 17). The lines are spoken by Brutus, not early in the play, as the context might suggest, but late. When the assassination of Julius Caesar is first being canvassed, the 'noble' Brutus is the one who has to be persuaded, not the one who is doing the persuading. Haughey himself did quote a version of these lines from *Julius Caesar* when deciding to call a snap election in 1989. Addressing the faithful at the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis, he declared: 'Our spirits are high; let us take the tide at the flood.' And so he went to the people for the third time in a decade, seeking the overall majority which had all along been denied him (and Fianna Fáil under his leadership) and which he thought was his and the party's God-given right. Had he considered the dramatic context and consequence of Brutus's lines, Haughey might have thought twice – and decided

not to call the election. Brutus is urging Cassius not to hold back in the face of the forces advancing on them but to march and meet them at Phillipi. The outcome is the defeat of their forces and the self-slaughter of both men. The result for Haughey of the 1989 election was coalition with the Progressive Democrats, the party founded by former Fianna Fáil politicians unhappy with his leadership; and it is they who would finally walk away in the face of the various scandals that emerged. Haughey was never tempted to fall on his sword, as the two Romans (and indeed Othello) had done. Instead, he liked to quote the example of the Chinese emperors who stayed in power until they were ninety. Mara warns Haughey in the play that he 'shouldn't have made that joke . . . about going on till you're ninety like the Chinese. It made people nervous' (pp. 69–70). The remark reflected Haughey's determination not to step down, and instigated a putsch against him which ironically was stage-managed by many of the same people who had first worked with him to oust Jack Lynch.

For it is in these ongoing internal struggles that the greatest relevance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to the career of Charles Haughey is to be found. The play opens with Caesar returning to Rome in triumph: those who rush to greet him are reminded that they have done exactly the same with Caesar's predecessor Pompey and are asked: 'And do you now strew flowers in his way, / That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?'¹⁹ This mode of overthrow and replacement of a leader is taken a step further by the conspirators when they actively plot Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March. To do so, they have to engage in the kind of internal political canvassing that became endemic in the Fianna Fáil camp during the Haughey era, soliciting support for a move against the leader by urging the greater good of the party. As Cassius relates, 'I have mov'd already / Some certain of the noblest-minded Romans / To undergo with me [this] enterprise' (I, iii, 121–2). But the biggest catch of all, that which would draw the wider support of the people to their cause, is Brutus. Cassius builds on Brutus's unease at Caesar's moves to have himself declared leader by stressing the ambition of the deed and how the kinship all three have shared is threatened by it. When Caesar falls at their hands, he singles out – in the well-known line '*Et tu, Brute*' (III, i, 77) – the one he least expected to oppose him. The pattern of recurrence suggested by the play creates the expectation that no leader will be secure in the future. The same process worked its way through Fianna Fáil. In turn, Haughey was replaced. On that final day in the Dáil, the air was thick with Shakespearean references. The figure who saw him off, Labour Party leader Dick Spring, cast himself in the role of Mark Antony and

opened by saying that he came to bury Haughey, not to praise him (even though, as he observed of the date, it was not the Ides of March). And when Bertie Ahern, the loyal deputy described by his boss as ‘the most cunning and devious of them all’, became Taoiseach and sought to distance himself from Haughey, the line ‘Et tu, Bertie’ was heard from more than one pair of lips. *Julius Caesar* does not offer the absolute identification with the great (if flawed) tragic hero that a political leader would desire; it shows instead the realities of political change, with the poisoning of former loyalties and the overthrow of hitherto acclaimed leaders by those politically closest to them.

At the end of the RTE *Haughey* documentary, Declan Kiberd offered the valedictory comment: ‘Perhaps the tragedy is that there was no tragedy, because he wasn’t really as great as he looked.’ He also spoke of all of the different and conflicting roles played by Haughey in his career as so many layers of the onion – and that they are peeled away to reveal an essential hollowness at the core. There is a suggestive resonance here for the ideological construction of ‘modern’ Ireland, and for many cherished icons and ideas. Charles Haughey did not contribute directly to the *Haughey* documentary – a singular absence amid family, friends (and enemies), and former colleagues, a case of *Hamlet* without the prince. He is unusual among former Taoisigh in that he wrote no memoirs. When P.J. Mara was asked about Haughey and the Arms Trial, he replied that Haughey never spoke of it. Haughey, citing his ill health, finally refused to testify any further before the tribunals that were inquiring into the sources of his wealth. The enigma of Charles Haughey has opened up a gap of possibility for Ireland’s playwrights to conjure with the man and his contradictions. As I write these concluding lines, I do so the week after Charles Haughey has died – on Tuesday 19 June 2006 (from cancer). In the aftermath of his death, fulsome tributes were paid by many (though not all). The lines he quoted from Shakespeare received frequent airing. As Eileen Battersby pointed out in *The Irish Times*, the Shakespearean figure who most came to mind during this period was not Othello but Richard III, another politician who stopped at nothing to gain power but when he had it did not know what to do with it. As she writes, ‘even Haughey must have suspected he had more in common with Richard III.’²⁰ But he may not have done so. After all, unlike *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*, *Richard III* has never been on the Junior or Leaving Certificate exams. Not one of Shakespeare’s history plays is to be found in the syllabus of the Irish educational system. Their lines are not lodged in the memory of the citizenry and hence are not available for ready quotation (and recognition) in political speeches. Perhaps they are excluded

because the parallels they might suggest to Irish political life would prove more immediate and less flattering than the tragedies.

Notes

- 1 Brian Friel, *The Communication Cord* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1989), p. 75.
- 2 Marina Carr's *Ariel* was produced by the National Theatre in association with Fiach MacConghail and first presented at the Abbey Theatre during the Dublin Theatre Festival in October 2002; Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* was co-produced by Ireland's and England's National Theatres with the UK touring company Out of Joint and opened at the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, in January 2002 before touring to Dublin, London and elsewhere; John Breen's *Charlie* was produced by the Yew Tree Theatre, Ballina, Co. Mayo in a touring production and was first presented at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin in April 2003.
- 3 Justin O'Brien, *The Modern Prince: Charles J. Haughey and the Quest for Power* (Dublin: Merlin Publishing, 2002), p. 168.
- 4 Cited in O'Brien, *The Modern Prince*, p. 2.
- 5 O'Brien, *The Modern Prince*, p. 164.
- 6 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1988), p. 975. The reference is to Act V, scene ii, lines 539–40.
- 7 Sebastian Barry, *Hinterland* (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 54. All future references to the play are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text.
- 8 Colm Tóibín, in an essay on *Hinterland*, confirms the identification: 'For an Irish audience, this would have been instantly accepted as a reference to the journalist Terry Keane, who published a series of articles in *The Sunday Times* about her long affair with Charles Haughey and who made no secret of the affair in her column in *The Sunday Independent*.' Colm Tóibín, 'Hinterland: The Public Becomes Private', in Christina Hunt Mahony (ed.), *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry* (Dublin: Carysfort Press; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), pp. 204–5.
- 9 Colm Tóibín, 'Hinterland', p. 205.
- 10 One example among many that might be cited is when Silvester self-consciously describes himself in the following terms: 'Enter Lear dressed fantastically in wild flowers' (p. 40).
- 11 This Gothic representation was first employed by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his column in *The Irish Times* in 1982, after one of Haughey's frequent falls from power. He repeated the Haughey/Dracula comparison in the columns he wrote when Haughey resigned. See Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Don't write him off just yet', *Irish Independent*, 25 January 1992, and also 'Diary: Clove of Garlic', *The Times*, 24 January 1992.

- 12 American politicians are given to this, but it is extremely rare in an Irish context.
- 13 Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2002), p. 38. All future references to the play are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.
- 14 For an essay which addresses just these aspects of *Ariel*, see Cathy Leeney, 'Marina Carr', in Anthony Roche (ed.), *The UCD Aesthetic: Celebrating 150 Years of UCD Writers* (Dublin: New Island Press, 2005), pp. 265–73. See also J. Michael Walton, 'Hit or Myth: The Greeks and Irish Drama', in Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (eds), *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 2002), pp. 3–36.
- 15 Karen Fricker, review of *Charlie*, *The Guardian*, 25 April 2003.
- 16 *Haughey*, a four-part television documentary (2005), co-produced by Radio Telefis Eireann and Mint Productions, directed by Niamh Sammon, co-produced by Steve Carlson and Miriam O'Callaghan.
- 17 John Breen, *Charlie*, unpublished script, p. 8. All future references to the play are to the script and will be incorporated in the text. I am grateful to John Breen for supplying me with a copy of the script and the reviews.
- 18 Shakespeare, *Othello*, in *The Arden Shakespeare*, p. 975.
- 19 Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, in *The Arden Shakespeare*, p. 335 (Act I, scene i, lines 51–2). All future line references to the play are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.
- 20 Eileen Battersby, 'Haughey was an Opportunistic Pragmatist', *The Irish Times*, 24 June 2006.