A note on Munro’s “Executioners” and the Fall of Troy

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The cause of the fire is not made explicit, but it is fairly clear that Robina's two eldest brothers, Jimmy and Duval, were responsible. In this regard, "Executioners" is a kind of detective story. The title, though part ironic (the brothers are "executioners"—which suggests justified killing—only in the eyes of their own family) does indicate that at least one person has been killed by two or more people, and therefore that the fire was set deliberately. Also, there is an empty gas can near the house, suggesting arson, and Jimmy and Duval were previously charged for siphoning off gas illegally (Munro, 123, 120)—not really a logical association with the fire, but a significant one. They certainly have motive and inclination to take revenge on Stump Troy. "'Jimmy and Duval are good natured,' Robina said. 'They are not mean boys. But they don't forget when somebody has played a dirty trick on them. They don't let up on a person then.' "'Oh, they hate him! If they was out on a dark night and old Stump was out on the road, he'd soon be sorry he ever heard of them! " (Munro, 120). At the time, Helena does not understand the nature of their quarrel, but Stump was a well known bootlegger, and she later surmises that Jimmy and Duval were rivals who had quarrelled with him. The people of the area assemble to watch the fire, and the firefighters' futile attempts to quell it but, although Robina and her other siblings are there, Jimmy and Duval are conspicuously absent. When Helena yells out asking where they are, Robina—unprecedently—hits her very hard. Assuming that Jimmy and Duval set the fire, it would of course be wiser for them to turn up with everyone else to watch the blaze, just as it would be wiser for Robina not to react violently to Helena's question—both reactions are likely to draw attention to the family. But given that Robina's family seem to act by instinct rather than considered judgments, this is what one would expect them to do if guilty: avoid the scene of the crime and try to silence anyone making possibly incriminating remarks.

Alice Munro's story "Executioners" appears in her collection Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You (1974). It did not receive much critical attention for about fifteen years, and
Munro herself is surprisingly negative in her judgement: “I don’t think [it] works at all. It’s a very embarrassing story” (Struthers, 27). Yet, though it may be presumptuous to disagree so completely with the author, it seems to me a very successful story, which achieves a great deal in short compass and yet moves forward smoothly, with no abrupt transitions or evident compressions. I want here to defend this judgement by considering one strand of “Executioners,” the parallels with the account of the Trojan War that we find in the *Iliad*. Munro’s references to the epic poem have usually been noted in more recent criticism, but then dismissed as a fairly minor element in her story. However, I shall argue that they are fundamental to its wider themes: they should change our perception of the bootleggers’ feud that causes two deaths, they highlight and help to define a way of life now largely vanished from Western culture, and they point us to a view of literature as history.

Like many of Munro’s heroines, Helena, who tells her own story, is a social misfit, too out-of-town and yet middle class to fit in at school, and constantly made fun of; she is perhaps especially sensitive because on the verge of puberty. She is fully accepted only by the brothers and sisters of Robina, her mother’s help, who live in a poor house well out in the country. She is deeply afraid of another poor country boy, Howard Troy, who frequently ambushes her on the way home asking tauntingly “You want to fuck?” and she has fantasies about driving spikes into him and watching all his venom spurt out. One night Howard Troy’s house is set on fire. He gets out, but his crippled father, Stump Troy, does not. Howard then rushes back into the blazing house, and also perishes. Horrific as this is, the effect on Helena is positive. Her fantasies have been realized and her enemy removed, and she is free to become “like anybody else,” leaving behind her childhood of “panic and disgrace” (Munro, 124). There is a kind of postscript to the story set about fifty years later, when Helena is near retirement and looks back on the pattern of her life.

As soon as one thinks about it, the names Helena and Troy and the burning down of a house and its inhabitants recall the story of the siege and sacking of Troy, told in the *Iliad*. Yet critics have either ignored the association, or treated it as a fairly casual one. Two see it as essentially a way of belittling the characters, an “ironically deflating type of classical allusion” (Carrington, 127) or a “deliberate jest” (MacKendrick, 69). A third critic, Carscallen, who pays more attention to “Executioners” than anyone previously (there are about fifty references to it in his book on Alice Munro) takes the association with the city of Troy more seriously. But for him it is one of many apocalyptic motifs, most of which are Christian—there is a “convergence of biblical motifs at the climax of ‘Executioners’” (Carscallen, 426)—and he does not explore the parallels with Troy in any detail.

There is, certainly, an ironic juxtaposition between the Helena of the story, by her own account an ordinary person who does not actually make anything happen—she is not at all responsible for the fire—and the legendary beauty Helen of Troy, who brought about a ten-year war. (The best known reference to the story in English is probably in Marlowe’s *Faustus*. “Is this the face that launched a thousand ships? And burnt the topless towers of Ilium”—emphasizing Helen’s beauty and power, and the height and splendour of the city.) Yet the plot of “Executioners” does recall the story of the Trojan war throughout. Helena sees Robina’s family, and especially the two, fair-haired, grown-up brothers, as her allies; in play, they are likely husbands. “Whose girl friend is she?” they said, Mine. Mine. And they play-fought over me, each of them grabbing me from the other and trapping me in a hard hug. I loved their smell ....“(119) (Here and elsewhere there is a sense of Helena’s developing sexual awareness.) Her enemy is Howard Troy, who threatens to rape—
perhaps abduct—her. In the Greek legend, after Paris of Troy abducted Helen, her husband Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon led the Greek host against Troy. They ultimately burnt the city to the ground, destroyed (among many others) Paris and his father Priam, king of Troy, and recovered Helen. Jimmy and Duval also eliminate their enemy and his family, though their quarrel is with the father and not the son, and the rescue of Helena (freeing her from the menace of Howard Troy) is inadvertent. And it may be worth noting that Robina, who seems to be the power in the family urging her brothers to take revenge, and who exults in the burning of the Troy’s house, plays much the same part in the feud as the Greek goddess Athene does at Troy.  

6 Two other images may reinforce the association with the Iliad. Jimmy and Duval live in and operate from “an unpainted slightly listing house, with no shade tree near it, adrift on the weedy fields—in winter adrift on the snow—just out of reach of the bush, like an unlucky boat on the pond”(118). At the beginning of the story, Helena longs to be hidden away, high up in a tower, and at the end of the story she spends most of her leisure time “on the eighteenth floor of an apartment building”: her wish has been fulfilled (113, 125). These are very realistic descriptions. Poor country-people’s houses frequently stand in the open, list, and are unpainted. And, apart from a possibly sexual connotation, Helena’s desire to hide away in a tower is a very believable reaction to her sense of being persecuted. Yet the images also resemble epic similes: in the first, the analogy with a boat is a complete one (“listing”, “adrift”) rather than a casual comparison, and may suggest the beached ships from which the Greeks assailed Troy; and the second image may recall the high towers of the city.

7 But what is the point of the parallels with the story of Troy? The story is realistic, sociologically and psychologically, and can stand entirely independent of the Trojan associations. And, as already noted, Helena is very unlike Helen of Troy. However, “Executioners” is not only about her personal experiences of being isolated and taunted, and going through the travails of puberty. It is also about politics, class structure, and—more deeply—the nature of an older, rural way of life that is now disappearing; and the parallel with the Trojan War is especially relevant here, in suggesting that way of life’s links to a very ancient past. A point often overlooked is that the story is set back almost fifty years, probably in the mid-twenties—(Something was published in 1974)—and thus might be classed as historical. There are reminders of period near the beginning. Helena’s father was defeated as an MP in 1911, admittedly before she was born. She mentions that the house she then lived in was torn down “years later,” which is unspecific but gives the sense of a long time having passed. And at the end of the story we are again reminded that the events took place two generations ago.

8 In the nineteen-twenties, the mind set of Robina and her family was much commoner that it is now. Her world is considerably different from that of most twentieth-century North Americans or, indeed, from that of most literate people of the last 500 years. In some ways, it offers wider possibilities and greater excitement because the supernatural is present and because issues are perceived in absolutes rather than compromises. After her brother Duval has been out in the sun all day without a hat, he asks his grandmother to get him a drink of water. His grandmother is dead. The modern interpretation is, as Helena suggests, that he has sunstroke. Robina’s is: “He was having a sight of Heaven“ (Munro, 117). When she shows Helena “wolf tracks” in the bush, Robina presumably does not believe this herself. But she does seem to believe the story she tells of the baby eaten by wolves and by the dog that had been pulling its sleigh, and this story is not set in some
distant past. Robina’s world is unpredictable and threatening, and both nature and people are remorseless. Even if Jimmy and Duval did not intend to kill Stump Troy, they must have known that, crippled as he was, he was likely to die in the fire; and Robina herself has no regrets.

This view of the world is now much commoner among children than among adults. Helena shares it in part, which explains why she admires Robina and tends to accept her version of events—until the fire. She half believes in magic. The house where she lives out her unhappy childhood seems malevolent in itself, with windows “swollen out like insects’ eyes” (Munro, 114). Howard Troy seems less a person than an embodiment of evil, and if a hole could be made in him the poison would leak out (Munro, 120-21). When he dies, it as if all that was wrong with her life has been exorcised, and she is free to begin again. Helena too, at least subconsciously, believes in absolute revenge and magical deliverance. Ironically, though, Howard Troy’s death works a kind of magic that allows her to leave behind the world of magic and bloody revenge.

Seeing Robina a few years later, Helena comments on “her long steps that always seemed to be taking her downhill” (Munro, 124), presumably into misfortune and also away from Helena. Robina’s world belongs to the past, not just Helena’s but the historical past, and is disappearing. It is probably significant that she loses her arm to a modern invention, an electric wringer (Munro, 116-17). Her house was set in an open field, but reached by walking through the “bush”; it was remote, and surrounded by terrain not much different from the original forest. Now—fifty years later—it is “behind where the airport is now”; the area has become part of the modern world. And, as Helena reflects at the end of the story, Robina, Jimmy, and Duval may well be dead. Indeed, in their tenacity, ferocity, belief in supernatural intervention, and code of revenge, Robina and her brothers have more in common with the Mycenes who battled at Troy than they have with modern Ontario. Their story is an archetypal one that constantly reappears throughout human history (or pre-history), an ongoing feud that ends in the complete destruction of one side. Some of the names are probably significant in this context. “Robina” would sound eccentric at the time, and a plausible name for a poor country woman, but also suggests Robin Hood, who operated outside the law. “Howard” is aristocratic and military, born by the commander of the English fleet that defeated the Spanish Armada. “Duval” has no obvious associations, though being French makes it slightly exotic here.

The implicit comparison between the burning of Troy and the burning of Stump Troy’s house works both ways. If the destruction of Troy is drastically reduced in scale and not presented in epic language, it has far less grandeur and its random cruelty is highlighted. Robina’s family do not seem to have had any scores to settle with Howard Troy, and his death is an incidental consequence of burning the house. Similarly, most of those who died in the sack of Troy had done nothing to offend the Greeks. But, on the other hand, the comparison grants some meaning and lustre to the bootleggers’ feud. Seen through the lens of epic, Jimmy and Duval are at least men of their word and their family’s threats of revenge are meaningful. And Howard’s trying to save his father, though as doomed as, say, Hector’s defiance of Achilles, is evidently heroic. An attempt at rescue is by far the most convincing explanation for his running back into the blazing house, though the townspeople seize on other, far-fetched explanations, as they cannot accept that someone as socially despised as Howard could behave heroically. Modern interpretations of people and events are not all encompassing or even necessarily correct in their own terms.
The last part of the story moves very swiftly through about fifty years and ends with Helena close to retirement. Her final reflection is that the events she has recounted will soon be forgotten: “When everybody is dead who could have remembered it, then I suppose the fire will be finished with, it will be just as if nobody had ever run through the door.” Awareness of the Trojan parallels reverses the meaning of this otherwise rather low-key ending. The burning of Troy is not forgotten, and Howard and the others will not “be finished with” if Helena passes on her story: memories survive if they are preserved in narrative.

NOTES

1. Mackendrick points to Robina’s associations with the infernal (70). “There was something sooty, smoky about her” and at home she provided “such moist black devil’s food” (“Executioners,” 116, 118-9). Until the end of the story, when Robina has diminished and become absurd, she seems to Helena to exude supernatural power, and she has intense malignancy towards her chosen enemies. This fits Satan, but also Athene.

2. Readers of English history may think of Claude Duval, the suave Norman highwayman who operated from London in the 1660s, and classical readers may recall that “val” means valley, and Agamemnon is frequently spoken of as “lord of the plains”—but this is to drift into mere speculation, and is not necessary for the argument of the paper. It does, however, raise the question of how detailed the references to the Trojan War are intended to be. Presumably we are meant to note the names “Helena” and “Troy,” and the burning of the house. Almost as certainly, we are not intended to read in the links just mentioned for the name “Duval.” As to the middle level of reference, such as the description of Jimmy and Duval’s house, and Helena’s obsession with high towers, it will be clear that I regard these images as conveying associations with Troy. It would follow that this was the author’s intention, in some sense. The qualification is that the links may have been made only semi-consciously: the images are appropriate, but the author was not necessarily concerned to work out exactly why they fit the characters.

ABSTRACTS

L’intrigue de la nouvelle d’Alice Munro « Executioners », où deux frères mettent le feu chez les Troy, famille dont ils tuent le père et le fils, fait, bien entendu, écho à l’Iliade. Helena, la protagoniste qui, après le meurtre du fils Troy, ne se sent plus menacée de viol, recommence une vie nouvelle. Il existe d’autres détails qui font référence à d’autres épisodes de l’Iliade : la maison des frères est comparée à un bateau, Helena aime les hautes tours ou encore s’intéresse à une figure de la déesse Athéna. Cette mise en parallèle de la nouvelle avec le poème homérique agit sur notre perception des deux frères qui sont des contrebandiers pauvres et superstitieux. En effet, soumise aux normes du monde moderne, leur motivation meurtrière ne tient pas la route.
La nouvelle met ainsi l’accent sur des idées et principes contestables pour en montrer la relativité, la relativité de toute idée et de tout principe inscrit dans la cartographie de l’histoire. Autrement dit, l’action criminelle des deux frères n’est pas dépourvue de traces d’héroïsme. Ce qui est aussi une autre manière de rappeler l’impact de la narration sur la mémoire de l’homme.

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