When Dionysus lands on Erin: Greek tragedy on Irish grounds

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Greek Tragedy on Irish Grounds

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The Greeks looked within their borders, and we like them, have a history fuller than any modern history of imaginative events; and legends which surpass, as I think, all legends but theirs in wild beauty, and in our land, as in theirs there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend.

W. B. Yeats

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INTRODUCTION

The Advent of Dionysus: Greek Tragedy in Ireland

Greek tragedy is a well-known terrain for the Irish. This particular formulation properly emphasizes the dynamic manner in which the Irish traditionally associate themselves with the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The Irish do not simply read the Greek tragic plays; rather, they make them their own. As impressive as this may sound, there is ample evidence to support this claim: "In the twentieth century, there seem to be more translations and versions of Greek tragedy that have come from Ireland than from any other country in the English-speaking world. In many ways Ireland was and is constructing its identity through the representations offered by Greek tragedy" (McDonald 2002: 37). Specifically, the surge of Irish interest in Greek tragedy peaked from the end of the twentieth century onwards, considering that "since the 1980s there have been well over fifty Irish versions of Greek tragedy, which are distinguished collectively as much by their quality as by their quantity" (Harrison & Macintosh 2019: 2). Taking cues from this observation, this thesis aims to thoroughly examine this phenomenon – its roots and consequences – by shedding light on some of the most characteristic instances of the Irish tendency to engage with Greek tragedy.

Given these assertions, two fundamental questions arise: first, why has Greek tragedy become so important in Ireland, and second, what is so special about the Irish way of appropriating the themes derived from Greek tragedy? With these queries in mind, the following chapters will analyze four Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy written by Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney, and Marina Carr, all produced at the apex of the Greek tragedy frenzy in Ireland, between 1984 and 2004. These adaptations are Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984), an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*; Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), adaptations of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Antigone*, respectively; and Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. Although relating to the ancient source in different ways, these notable Irish playwrights have composed impactful retellings of some of the most prominent Greek plays. By looking closely at them, one gradually discerns how these adaptations are not only imbued with Irish relevance, but also deserve to be recognized as distinct Irish works. They hold a fixed place in Ireland's theatrical history, contributing significantly to the establishment of a robust and ongoing literary lineage – a series of contemporary Irish plays that share a common Greek ancestry.

It must be admitted that the profound Irish fascination with Greek tragedy is not confined to local boundaries, but aligns with a broader global trend.[1] As Edith Halls explains:

> More Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity. Translated, adapted, staged, sung, danced, parodied, filmed, enacted, Greek tragedy has proved magnetic to writers and directors searching for new ways in which to pose questions to contemporary society and to push back the boundaries of theatre. The mythical, dysfunctional, conflicted world portrayed in the archetypal plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has become one of the most important cultural and aesthetic prisms through which the real, dysfunctional, conflicted world of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries has refracted its own image. (2004: 2)

Clearly, the reception of Greek tragedy is not an exclusive Irish trait. Rather, this phenomenon goes hand in hand with a wider tendency to produce new versions of the violent and conflict-laden stories of Greek tragedy. Presumably, the mythic distance afforded by these ancient narratives serves as a mirror to articulate and comment on tangible contemporary concerns. Although this propensity is largely ubiquitous, the Irish seem to stand out in this endeavour. As Michael Walton affirms: "It is no accident that it is Irish settings which have given these Greek classics a new dimension: for Ireland has the last English-speaking contemporary drama that still sees the theatre as the natural place to juggle ideas. Only in Ireland… if you have something to say, you write a play about it" (2002: 8). Arguably, Irish playwrights are fortunate to hail from a place where theatre still matters. Therefore, on one level, the claimed accomplishments of Irish dramatists depend on the favourable setting provided by the Irish theatrical stage. On a second level, however, their success as adaptors is attributed to the unparalleled power and acuity with which they connect the mythical stories of Greek tragedy to recent historical events that plague Ireland.

Referring to this second aspect, Marianne McDonald hints at the vigour with which the Irish embrace the protagonists and stories of Greek tragedy to comment on the present:

[1] Stephen Harrison explicates this phenomenon: "It is an interesting but comprehensible paradox that classical texts have achieved a high profile in contemporary literature at a time when fewer people than ever can read these works in the original languages. Since 1960 numbers learning Latin and Greek at school in the UK and elsewhere have declined substantially, and students are increasingly learning Latin and Greek (if at all) in universities rather than in secondary education. On the other hand, classics is perhaps livelier than ever as a set of intellectual disciplines, and study of the classical world in general continues to be vigorous in many schools and universities throughout the Anglophone world. In this same period, poets writing in English have shown an interest in classical material unparalleled since the nineteenth century, and certainly much more marked than in the period 1920–1960" (2009: 1).

> Each of these modern playwrights addresses in his own way 'the Irish question'. What do people do when their country is occupied and exploited? How can they confront those who wield near-absolute control when they have been systematically weakened for hundreds of years by those very powers? Ireland is England's Trojan women; its Medea exploited by Jason; its Antigone, who in the face of insufferable odds, does not falter, but retains a sense of justice. (1997: 58)

Evidently, the Irish have utilized Greek tragedy as a means to convey their political and social concerns. As this thesis will explore in detail, in the adaptations under scrutiny, the well-known transgressive tales of Antigone and Medea, as well as the stories of lesser-known heroes such as Philoctetes, are systematically linked to key events in Ireland's tumultuous history. To put it more bluntly, the Irish dramatists adapt Greek tragedy's canonical stories "and use them as intellectual weapons to protest injustices" (McDonald 2003: 155). Placing these assumed injustices in the context of the Irish turbulent twentieth century, one can more or less anticipate the general scope and topical resonance of these adaptations. To name a few characteristic episodes: the intricacies of Ireland's colonial past, British rule, the partition of Ireland, together with the subsequent aggressive demand for reunification – demonstrated by the Troubles in the North – were among the main events that prompted a large number of Irish writers to draw from Greek tragedy. Additionally, one must consider some other native concerns found in the adaptations to be examined. These include the relationship of the Irish to their ancestral land, the significance of Irish customs in terms of familial ties and the handling of the dead, the place of women in Irish society, the changes in the fabric of Irish society brought about by Ireland's economic ups and downs, and the dominant role played by religion, folklore, and superstition in Irish daily life and self-image.

By choosing to adapt a Greek tragedy for the Irish public, the involved dramatists utilize a timeless and universal medium to articulate their grievances and underscore the lasting relevance of collective struggles and personal trauma within the context of Ireland's complex history. With their adaptations, they craft a poignant commentary on the intricate interplay between power, justice, and the human condition. This invites both readers and audiences to contemplate the enduring legacy of Ireland's past in shaping its present and future, both on a political and personal level. Overall, it is not far-fetched to argue that, in the hands of the Irish, Greek tragedy transforms into a self-reflective instrument. Michael Walton decisively attests to this:

> That, though, is the power of myth. It becomes personal by virtue of its universality, inviting decodings tied to each new occasion or circumstance. Myth can reveal you to yourself. And, as Irish writers have turned to ancient Greek material as translators, adaptors, commentators, or what you will, so in the process, through myth, they have tended to unmask themselves. (2002: 4)

By delving into the Irish reception of Greek tragedy, the Irish sense of self transpires. That is, by making Greek tragedy their own, the Irish come closer to understanding themselves. The act of revisiting Greek tragic tales, such as those of *Antigone* or *Medea*, facilitates a reinterpretation that echoes with current societal and cultural nuances, offering a unique lens through which the Irish can reflect on their own time and identity. This is something that applies to all adaptations discussed in this thesis. As will be shown, in their respective plays, Paulin, Heaney, and Carr are all engaging with the material of Greek tragedy while maintaining a steadfast focus on the challenging Irish present. As John McDonagh comments about them: "Their chosen texts reflect the violence, betrayal and sense of personal crisis that characterize not only the original Greek play but the context of its contemporary manifestation" (2002: 213). In essence, these playwrights use Greek tragedy to address issues pertinent to both private and public aspects of Irish life, inviting critique and simultaneously serving as wellsprings of inspiration for change.

With this information at hand, the meaning behind the title of this thesis becomes clearer: it alludes to the advent of Dionysus, the patron god of Greek tragedy, in Erin – the literary and poetic name for Ireland. As a result of this association, new renditions of Greek tragedy come to surface, rooted in Irish grounds. This statement deliberately carries a double meaning: first, it designates the Irish origin of these adaptations; second, it asserts that these particular versions of Greek tragedy are constructed in a way that fully embodies their intrinsic Irishness. Accordingly, this thesis will trace the conditions under which Greek tragedy is staged on Irish soil, and in strictly Irish terms.

The Irish and the Classics: An Age-Old Affair

While Greek tragedy started having a big impact in Ireland during the second half of the twentieth century, the Irish connection to the Classics extends far into the past. There are signs that "the classical history of the island dates as far back as the fifth century, and the work of Christian missionaries in Irish monasteries" (Impens 2018: 11). This association seems to have been maintained over the centuries, "from early medieval Irish monks reading Greek, to the nineteenth century 'celticizing' movement which was aligned with the Greeks" (McDonald 1996: 95). In addition, one must consider that Irish bardic poetry is filled with "learned references to the texts of ancient Greece and Rome. As early as the twelfth century, the first Irish-language translation of Virgil, *Imtheachta Aeniasa*, made its appearance: and thereafter texts abounded with comparisons between local heroes and Aeneas, local beauties and Helen, local scholars and Ennius" (Kiberd 2002: vii-viii). To this end, the pedagogical value of Classical languages in Ireland is another aspect to be considered: "with the establishment of the 'hedge schools' from 1695 onwards, Greek and Latin became the mainstays of the curriculum. In the eighteenth century travellers to the west coast regularly speak of conversing with the locals in Latin or Greek" (Macintosh 2016: 324). Such evidence suggests that the languages and cultures of the Greco-Roman world proved decisive in shaping the Irish mentality over the centuries.[2]

However, when it comes to the Romans and the Greeks, the Irish exhibit a clear preference for the latter. This notion, expressing the unique affinity of the Irish with the Greeks, was most memorably articulated by Pádraic Pearse, the famous Irish revolutionary and a prominent member of the Gaelic League. This was an organisation that had as a mission to promote the Irish language and culture at a time when both were in decline. With this objective in mind, Pearse, in his 1897 essay entitled 'The Intellectual Future of the Gael', assuredly proclaims: "What the Greek was to the ancient world, the Gael will be to the modern; and in no point will the parallel prove more true than in the fervent and noble love of learning which distinguishes both races. The Gael, like the Greek, loves learning, and he loves it for his own sake" (1917: 231). In an attempt to revitalize the interest of his compatriots in their own language and culture, Pearse invokes the Greeks as a role-model and source of emulation. Pearse views the Irish as the modern heirs of the

[2] Although almost half a century has passed since its publication, W. B. Stanford's *Ireland and the Classical Tradition* (1976) remains a standard for examining the historical manifestations of Greco-Roman influences on Irish life, thought, politics, and culture. Stanford is particularly aware of the reciprocal manner in which the Classics and the Irish have influenced one another. As he states in the introduction of his seminal work: "the classical tradition has two general results in Ireland. It changed the outlook of the Irish, and the Irish in turn changed it by new interpretations and new creative writing" (1976: viii). Although predating any of the theatrical plays examined in this thesis, Stanford's assertion holds true regarding the impact that these adaptations have had in Ireland, as well as in relation to the ancient Greek precursor.

ancient Greeks, drawing parallels between the two civilizations to inspire a renewed sense of cultural pride and intellectual vigour among his fellow countrymen. From this standpoint, the geographical and temporal gap between ancient Greece and modern Ireland not only fails to hinder their relationship, but actually fosters it. In essence, Pearse implies that the Greeks will help the Irish to become more Irish.

Observant of this dynamic, Fiona Macintosh succinctly captures the unique Greco-Irish connection:

> That a special relationship existed between Ireland and ancient Greece was a widespread and longstanding belief. For not only had Irish scholars done much to preserve the classical tradition before the Viking invasions as they took their learning with them across Europe, the medieval Gaelic tradition had also recognized and fruitfully exploited the kinship between Greek and Irish myth. The famous figures of Irish saga were lent qualities strikingly reminiscent of their Greek counterparts, and Greek heroes were refashioned so that they assumed a distinctly Irish hue: Maeve became a surrogate Clytemnestra and Cuchulain an Irish Achilles… Moreover, many of the efforts to 'celticise' Ireland from the 1880s onwards were in fact veiled attempts to 'hellenise' the country by aligning the burgeoning nation with what was perceived to be the ideal nation-state, fifth-century Athens. (1992: 189)

Macintosh points out the importance of Greek literature and mythology during the Celtic Revival.[3] Especially, the demonstrated kinship between some of the most prominent Greek and Irish heroes is instructive as to the breadth and depth of this interrelationship. Overall, with the advent of cultural nationalism in the late 19th century, Greek mythology found renewed significance as Irish intellectuals and cultural leaders sought to establish a rigid national identity. In light of this, the rise of national consciousness among the Irish people had Greek backing. The *polis* of Athens, with the dramatic festival of the Great Dionysia considered an exemplary manifestation of its democratic and self-regulating institutions, served as a model for the establishment of an autonomous Irish state, free from British influence.[4]

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[3] Macintosh also makes mention of the French scholar Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, "holder of the chair of Celtic Languages and Literature at the College de France, [who] maintained that the sagas of the Irish heroic period were the product of a society at the same stage of development as the Greeks and Trojans in the Homeric epics. De Jubainville's observation proved particularly helpful to the writers of the literary revival, giving authority to their claims that the rich epic tradition in Irish literature (as had been the case in fifth-century Athens) would form the basis upon which the next literary stage - the dramatic one - was to be founded" (1992: 189). Arguably, the aftereffects of this parallelism can still be traced nowadays, with the flood of Irish theatrical productions of Greek tragedy.

[4] For more information about the central role of the Dionysia in the Athenian civic ideology and democracy see: Goldhill (1987).

Inevitably, to fully comprehend the extent of the Irish affinity for the Greeks and the role it played in the formation of a distinctive national consciousness, one must juxtapose it against Ireland's colonial history. Specifically, when examining the Irish connection with ancient Greece, particularly their fascination with Greek tragedy, it is necessary to touch on the history and implications of the British occupation of Ireland and the mechanisms of British hegemony. As Declan Kiberd argues:

> By way of contrast and perhaps by way of reaction, the emphasis in Ireland in recent decades has increasingly been placed on the Greeks…This emphasis makes sense if we consider the peculiar fate of the 'classics' in Ireland, where it would seldom be used to underwrite empire but more often to unpick the very idea. (2002: xii)

Against this historical backdrop, an additional factor comes to light that clarifies the Irish affinity with the Greeks: a deliberate and elaborate strategy of cultural resistance against the colonial presence.

The British rule of Ireland unfolded on multiple fronts. Beyond territorial dominance, the British played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of the Irish. The British administration employed various means, including cultural and educational policies, to influence how the Irish were perceived both within the island and internationally. In fact, the British felt compelled to manipulate the image of the Irish to sustain and justify their dominion there through the creation of narratives that aligned with their imperial interests. Marianne McDonald specifically refers to this form of control:

> Ireland's history shows the imprint of English imperialism to the point that by 1703, the Catholic Irish themselves owned only fourteen percent of their land. To justify their colonization, the English felt it was ideologically necessary to construe the Irish as barbarians. They drew the analogy that, just as the Romans had civilized them, so they were in turn carrying out a duty to do the same for the Irish. (1997: 57)

The civilizer/barbarian dichotomy is a powerful hegemonic tool at the disposal of the British giving them not only an arbitrary sense of moral superiority, but also legitimizing their intervention tactics against the Irish. As Seamus Deane explains: "Most pronounced among these are the assumption that the strife in Ireland is the consequence of a battle between English civilization, based on laws, and Irish barbarism, based on local kinship loyalties and sentiments" (1985: 35). This constructed narrative not only justified British colonialism, but also served as a subtle mechanism for cultural assimilation, coercing the Irish into adopting English norms and

values as a purported prerequisite for becoming part of the 'civilized' world. As Deane concludes: "To become free and prosperous the Irish were evidently going to have to become English" (*Ibid*.).

In this context, the British Empire strategically incorporated Classical languages and culture, with particular emphasis on Latin and Roman influences, as essential elements of its agenda to impose control over Ireland.[5] Consequently, although the Irish connection with the Classics predates the arrival of the British, it underwent a major transformation after the English plantation in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Protestant ruling class strategically utilized the Classics as a political tool to consolidate its position, marking a striking shift in the association of the Irish with the Greco-Roman world.[6] In a way, what mattered was no longer the knowledge of the ancient world, of which the Irish already possessed a great amount, but mostly the symbolic manipulation of this era for the purposes of authority and domination.

To provide a characteristic example, the alleged Celtic subordination to the British occupier is most famously reported by the English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold. In his essay 'On the study of Celtic literature' (1867), Arnold employs a classical analogy to extensively expound on the supposed mental defects he attributes to the Gael when compared to their British counterpart:

> Sentimental, always ready to react against the despotism of fact; that is the description… of the Celt… Balance, measure, and patience, these are the eternal conditions, even supposing the happiest temperament to start with, of high success; and balance, measure, and patience are just what the Celt has never had. Even in the world of spiritual creation, he has never, in spite of his

[5] Ultimately, this imperial strategy would backfire producing the exact opposite results. Impens provides a historical recount of this outcome: "Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the nature of Anglo-Irish literature would change, when writers of the Celtic Revival redefined Irish literature in English as a national literature, and fashioned a Gaelic heritage in an Anglophone context. Anglo-Irish literature would evolve from being synonymous with the literature of the Ascendancy to a literature addressing, and certainly claiming to represent, the descendants of the 'native Irish' and the Catholic population, as well as Irish protestants. At that moment, when Irish writers began to emphasise their cultural identity, the classics became prime material which could reconnect them with their broken past, and be re-appropriated in a specifically Irish context. Throughout the twentieth century, Greek and Latin literatures therefore played a central role in the redefinition of Irish literature, as writers began to re-appropriate material from those two traditions from its exclusively English re-interpretation, and to make it their own. Their personal representation of the classics would reveal much of their definition of Irish literature, and of their sense of the position occupied within Europe" (2018: 11).

[6] Indeed, the familiarity of the Irish with the Greco-Roman world is something that puzzled the British occupiers: "The widespread knowledge in Irish communities of Latin (sometimes even Greek) baffled the Protestant British governing classes, who associated classical expertise with social prestige. In 1797, the painter George Holmes was astounded to meet, 'in the uncultivated part of the country', some 'good Latin scholars' who could not speak a single word of English. The bafflement aggravated the British fear of Irish insurgency, since ancient history was associated with the Republican ideology of French revolutionaries. When Irish radicals came to England during the Chartist unrest of the 1840s and 1850s, the classical expertise of even those from poor backgrounds often caused astonishment" (Hall & Stead 2020: 207).

> admirable gifts of quick perception and warm emotion, succeeded perfectly, because he never has had steadiness, patience, sanity enough to comply with the conditions under which alone can expression be perfectly given to the finest perceptions and emotions. The Greek has the same perceptive, emotional temperament as the Celt; but he adds to this temperament the sense of measure; hence his admirable success in the plastic arts, in which the Celtic genius, with its chafing against the despotism of fact, its perpetual straining after mere emotion, has accomplished nothing. (qtd. in Dworkin 2012: 65).

Arnold justifies the sense of Celtic inferiority to the British by arguing that the latter possess what the former lack, namely a rational disposition or "the despotism of fact", as he likes to frame it. Leaving aside how absurd and erroneous Arnold's claims nowadays sound, particularly regarding the artistic capabilities of the Irish, one is intrigued by his linking of the Irish with the Greeks. It is remarkable that the presumed kinship between modern Ireland and ancient Greece, the genealogy of which has been outlined above, is also recognized by someone who takes a rigid stance against the Irish. While Arnold eventually finds the so-called 'Celtic genius' insufficient compared to the Greek one, one cannot overlook the classical analogy underlying his argumentation: if the Irish are the Greeks, then the British are the Romans conquering them.[7] The explanation behind this outcome is self-evident for Arnold: none of the Greeks or the Irish are subject to the "despotism of fact", that defining Roman trait transferred to the British and ostensibly responsible for their present success and dominance.[8]

Contrary to Arnold's assertions, the Irish have consistently excelled in the arts and literature, and this achievement is intricately connected to their colonial predicament. As for the 'Greek' label, instead of resisting it, the Irish embraced it and made it their own. Following their forceful conquest, the Irish sought an intellectual victory against their occupiers, aiming to conquer the British not with arms but through culture. This objective could arguably be considered as one of the fundamental elements of the Celtic Revival, given that "the rhetorical

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[7] Interestingly, the same interplay but with inversed roles can be found in W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Statues', where Yeats "links the 1916 rebels to the Greeks at the battle of Salamis… implying a symbolic victory of (Irish/ Greek) civilization over (British/Persian) imperial barbarism" (Torrance & O'Rourke 2020: 7).

[8] Declan Kiberd exposes the latent role of Latin and its connection to British alignment with the Romans within the framework of the British educational system: "The standard justification for educational policies on the study of Latin was that learning the language was character-forming. As late as 1969… Latin was taken by over 70 per cent of secondary school students and was compulsory for matriculation at university. Latin provided the root-basis of many modern languages and their systems of grammar. But this was often a pretext for another agenda: the development in schoolchildren of an imperial, administrative mentality, as developed through a study of Caesar's writings and so on. The use of Roman numerals to describe a school XI or XV; the resort to nomenclature like 'Smith Major' or 'Smith Minor'; and the SPQR mentality accompanying these things was a way of initiating children in the rhetoric of empire; and the *virtus* displayed in establishing the past empire might serve to strengthen the current British affair" (2020: 30-31).

trope of the period was that the Irish were to be the Greeks to the English, usually philistine, Romans" (Macintosh 2016: 325). Moreover, as Macintosh elaborates, the Irish reception of Greek tragedy lies at the heart of such a systematic undertaking:

> The National Portrait Gallery's 2005 exhibition entitled 'Conquering England' borrowed its title from George Bernard Shaw's apt comment about the Irish cultural conquest of England: 'England had conquered Ireland, so there was nothing for it but to come over and conquer England'. The locus of this cultural conquest of England by the Irish has very often been the theater; and then, as now, it has regularly come about with the aid of the ancient Greeks. In many ways, the metropolitan center of London's knowledge of Greek tragedy in practice is the result of the mediation of key Irish literary and theatrical figures; and an Irish/Greek alliance – often proclaimed and routinely deployed – is evident today no less than it was in the late Victorian/early Edwardian period. (*Ibid*. 323)

It can thus be argued that the Irish reception of Greek tragedy has played a central role in their endeavour to distinguish themselves from the British, involving both physical liberation and cultural emancipation. The idea of highlighting cultural differences through Greek tragedy is consequently intertwined with the political aspiration for a united Ireland.[9] This connection first became evident during the time of Yeats and the Irish cultural nationalism of the Celtic Revival, and it has been maintained since then.[10] As we will closely observe in the adaptations examined in this thesis, the Irish demand for self-determination through the reception of Greek tragedy continues to manifest itself to this day.

Continuing with Yeats in order to better comprehend how Greek tragedy became a potent and enduring means for articulating and expressing a distinct Irish national identity, it is suitable to recount a noteworthy incident: the banning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* from the London stage by Lord Chamberlain in 1904.[11] This unfortunate outcome did not escape Yeats's attention,

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[9] The revolutionary connection between the Greek spirit of freedom and the Irish cause of independence is famously heralded by Pádraic Pearse, who calls for "the divine breath that moves through free peoples, the breath that no man of Ireland has felt in his nostrils for so many centuries, the breath that once blew through the streets of Athens that kindled, as wine kindles, the hearts of those who taught and learned in Clonmacnois'" (qtd. in Atkinson 1967: 72).

[10] "Yeats readily adopted the classical parallels when it became clear that they could provide fuel for the nationalist cause or when they could throw light upon his own use of Celtic material. The Irish speaking audiences who gather to hear poetry in the *Gaeltacht* (the Irish speaking areas on the west coast) are compared by Yeats to the attentive audiences who attended Sophocles' plays" (Macintosh 2003: 138). On Yeats's use of the Classics, see: Arkins (1990) and Liebregts (1993).

[11] To provide some background information behind this decision: "By 1728, theatre riots were breaking out when plays touched on sensitive political issues. This produced the legislation that effectively prevented spoken drama being used for radical purposes. Under the Licensing Act, passed on the 24th of June 1737,

who immediately understood the symbolism behind bringing the banned Sophoclean tragedy to Ireland and staging it in the newly built Abbey Theatre in Dublin. To quote Fiona Macintosh's telling of the story:

> By the end of the first year, there were political reasons too for staging Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* in particular. In 1904 Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree… was unsuccessful in his attempt to secure a licence from the Lord Chamberlain to stage the play in London. Tree's informal inquiry led to a number of attempts to stage the play. First and most significantly, Yeats seized the opportunity to use the ban as a means of putting the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on the theatrical map of the English-speaking world when it opened at the end of the year. The Lord Chamberlain's Office had no jurisdiction in Dublin; Ireland now had a chance to expose English philistinism for what it was. When Yeats announced the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, he added:
>
> > *Oedipus the King* is forbidden in London. A censorship created in the eighteenth century by Walpole… has been distorted by a puritanism which is not the less an English invention for being a pretended hatred of vice and a real hatred of intellect. Nothing has suffered so many persecutions as the intellect, though it is never persecuted under its own name.
>
> The banning of Sophocles' tragedy in England now enabled the Irish to side with the Greeks as champion of the intellect against the English/Roman tyrant. (2008: 527-8)

For various reasons, the production of *Oedipus Tyrannus* was delayed until 1924, within a changing political environment, given the newly formed Irish Free State.[12] Nevertheless, the reasons motivating Yeats's insistence on utilizing a Greek tragic play as one of the inaugural productions at Ireland's newly established national theatre speaks volumes about the significance of Greek tragedy in shaping the Irish understanding of self, both politically and aesthetically.[13] Therefore, with the inception of the cultural and nationalistic enterprise that was the Abbey,

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the Lord Chamberlain assumed the power to refuse a licence to any play acted 'for hire, gain, or reward', anywhere in Great Britain, 'as often as he shall think fit'. The Act provided the basis for the law surrounding theatrical censorship that survived, substantially unchanged, until the 1968 Theatre Act" (Hall & Stead 2020: 148).

[12] To obtain a comprehensive overview of the production history of *Oedipus Tyrannus* at the Abbey see: Roche (2001).

[13] Impens elaborates further on Yeats's utilization of Greek literary influences as active components of contemporary Irish writing: "The classics, which Yeats called the 'builders of my soul', and in particular the literature of ancient Greece, were central in his project for a new national Irish literature in English: they provided paradigms and examples which could nurture his ambitions for his country, as a literature initially based on local folklore and mythology, written for the people, and which has transcended geographical and temporal boundaries to become canonical in the Western world. Yeats had no interest in Rome, which he saw as an impoverished culture by far inferior to its Greek predecessors" (2018: 12).

signalling a new era in the chronicles of Irish theatrical history, Greek tragedy emerges as a cornerstone in the consolidation of Irish identity.

From the above account, it becomes clearer that the reception of Greek tragedy in Ireland transcends mere phases or trends, contrary to assumptions one might make given the exponential surge in such adaptations in recent years. Rather, the tendency to engage with Greek tragedy is deeply ingrained in Ireland's literary and theatrical landscapes, and accordingly reflects a longstanding and profound connection between the two cultures. This realization leads to two interrelated postulations: not only does the Irish enchantment with Greek tragedy serve as a foundational aspect of contemporary Irish theatre-making, but the increasing number of adaptations starting from the 1980s can also be viewed as the culmination of this age-old cultural alliance. Arguably, the presence of Dionysus has never been more strongly felt in Ireland than at this very moment.

Paulin, Heaney, Carr: Why Them, Why Together?

After presenting a historical overview of the strong connections between ancient Greece and modern Ireland, with an emphasis on the significant role that the reception of Greek tragedy traditionally plays within the Irish literary domain, a legitimate question arises: what led to the decision to focus in this thesis on the adaptations by Paulin, Heaney, and Carr rather than those by another Irish playwright? Is the selection of authors and plays driven by a certain thematic coherence, a distinctive interpretative lens, or a unique stylistic approach that distinguishes these adaptations from those of other Irish playwrights? Articulating a clear rationale behind this decision is critical for the overall structure and argumentation of this thesis. Without such criteria, the choice of Paulin's *The Riot Act*, Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, along with Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, and their grouping together, risks appearing unintelligible or arbitrary.

As mentioned earlier, since the 1980s, (Northern) Ireland has witnessed the staging of more than fifty theatrical plays claiming a Greek ancestry.[14] This is indeed a substantial number of plays, making it unrealistic to thoroughly present and analyze all of them in one single volume. Until now, Brian Arkins' *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy* (2010) stands as the only monograph dedicated to offering a comprehensive overview of all Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy up to the date of its publication. However, Arkins primarily aims to cover the breadth of the subject matter rather than delving deeply into its intricacies. He allocates a couple of pages to each adaptation, focusing on presenting its content concisely. The emphasis lies in evaluating the extent to which each adaptation deviates from the original tragedy. Consequently, Arkins cites key passages from the Irish versions that are either absent or altered compared to the respective ancient source-text. As for references to the involved Irish historico-political context, these are limited to what is absolutely necessary for a proper understanding of the play. Within this framework, Arkin's examination succeeds in helping one grasp the extent of the Irish entanglement with Greek tragedy, doing justice to the intricate interplay between cultures and delimiting the boundaries of adaptation as a theatrical practice. Undoubtedly, Arkins' book serves as a valuable starting point for anyone interested in becoming familiar with the history of Classical reception of Greek tragedy in Ireland.

Given the different scope of this thesis, some methodological adjustments are warranted. In choosing to concentrate on four adaptations instead of covering the entire set, the strategy adopted in this study will necessarily differ from Arkins'. As emphasized above, the primary objective of this thesis is to illustrate how certain theatrical works with an undeniable Greek

[14] For a complete list of these plays see: McDonald (2002: 80-2) and Macintosh (2016: 334).

ancestry should ultimately be recognized as distinct Irish plays. This does not comprise any attempt to deconstruct the chosen adaptations as such, but rather to reinforce the idea that they are contemporary plays with a 'life' of their own, independently or, more accurately, in synchrony with their thematic correspondence to a given Greek tragedy text. While these plays unquestionably owe thematic debt to works like *Medea* or *Antigone*, they simultaneously exhibit a deep-rooted connection to Ireland, encompassing its history, traditions, and diverse set of languages and dialects. In addition, all chosen adaptations, in one way or another, address the significant socio-political challenges that faced Ireland at the time of their production. Following the Irish tradition of staging national problems and proposing radical solutions through theatre, all three playwrights unapologetically tackle a variety of well-known issues that have traditionally tantalized Ireland. In view of all this, the overarching aim of this thesis is to exhibit that these specific adaptations should be acknowledged as significant contributions to recent Irish theatremaking. They actively participate in the public debate by serving as poignant reflections of the collective Irish consciousness, challenging societal norms, and sparking conversations vital for the evolution of the nation's identity and values.

To support this claim, it is necessary to conduct an exhaustive analysis of all Irish elements – tangible or elusive – included in these adaptations. This means that any Irish nuance spotted in the adaptations under scrutiny, whether it be mythological, political, literary, historical, or otherwise, will be extensively investigated. Upon identifying such topical references, their relation to the involved play and their functionality therein, as well as their standalone significance, will be meticulously examined. These points of interest will gauge and determine the degree of success of these adaptations in authentically representing and effectively capturing the evolving Irish sense of self. Accordingly, at the forefront of this investigation is the quest to decipher the techniques through which Paulin, Heaney, and Carr succeed in Irishizing the tragedies of *Antigone*, *Medea*, and *Philoctetes*, producing plays with their own distinct identity while preserving their idiosyncratic Greek character. In the end, the resulting constellation of Irish elements, formed after analyzing each adaptation, will unveil the depth to which all plays are immersed in an unmistakable Irish milieu.

To recapitulate, prioritizing depth over volume, this thesis will undertake a detailed analysis of four theatrical adaptations of Greek tragedy, which, for reasons briefly outlined in the following paragraphs of this section and supported at length in the coming chapters, incorporate a wide range of themes with a special Irish focus. To demonstrate this, I will first introduce each author and adaptation(s) separately, and then I will explain why their grouping comes across as significant and meaningful. The synergies forged among these plays will be seen as characteristic of the broader wave of Greek tragedy adaptations originating from Ireland since the 1980s,

reflecting the overall Irish inclination to culturally engage with ancient Greece. Essentially, this comprehensive exploration seeks not only to delve into the reciprocal interchange between Irish perspectives and Greek tragedy, but also to contribute to a deeper understanding of the enduring relevance and transformative power of Classical narratives within the rich tapestry of contemporary Irish theatrical discourse.

The first chapter of this thesis explores Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*, a play originating from Northern Ireland, initially staged in Derry in 1984. Both the location and the date foreshadow the main theme of Paulin's adaptation: the Troubles, which were at their climax at that time. Paulin detects in the tragedy of *Antigone* a mythic equivalent of the sectarian conflict raging in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, he produces an adaptation of the Greek play that not only reflects the violent ethnoreligious strife and its main perpetrators, but also takes a clear stance on it. Paulin, a Northern Irish Protestant by birth yet a fervent supporter of Irish Republicanism, in his version of Sophocles' tragedy makes Antigone come out victorious in her deadly duel with Creon. This outcome has a direct application to the pending Northern Irish affairs, as Antigone clearly embodies Republican ideals, while Creon is depicted as a caricature of the Unionist leadership. What is striking about this adaptation is that there is a direct correspondence between the stage characters and the central figures of the Troubles. Nevertheless, what makes *The Riot Act* truly stand out is the use of the Hiberno-English dialect by the play's protagonists. Paulin incorporates the actual language of the conflict, as spoken daily in the North, into the dialogues of his play. With this strategy, Paulin fabricates what is known as the vocabulary of the conflict, a common denominator between the opposing Catholic-Republican and Protestant-Loyalist communities. Although *The Riot Act* is Paulin's debut play, it is certainly his most memorable. Through his retelling of Antigone's sacrifice, he adeptly captures the extent of social injustice and political terror that afflicted Northern Ireland, unhesitant in pointing out those he holds accountable for these issues. Whether one agrees with Paulin's interpretation or not, *The Riot Act* is irrefutably a powerful theatrical testimony of this turbulent and traumatic period for Northern Ireland, especially at a time when the possibilities for the Troubles to be terminated looked extremely unlikely.

The second chapter is dedicated to Seamus Heaney, who, like Paulin, is mostly known for his poetry rather than for his output as a playwright. Curiously, the two instances in which Heaney wrote for the stage involved adaptations of Greek tragedies, both of which are examined in this thesis. *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, based on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* respectively, are representative of two different epochs for (Northern) Ireland. Hence, the decision was made to examine both adaptations within the same chapter, with a particular focus on accentuating the thematic contrast between them and emphasizing their placement in distinct

eras of Irish history. *The Cure at Troy*, similar to *The Riot Act*, was originally staged in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1990, during the Troubles. Naturally, the ongoing sectarian stalemate is the main theme of Heaney's adaptation. However, Heaney takes a quite different stance towards the deadlock compared to Paulin. Instead of adopting a condemning attitude, discharging polemical accusations, and looking for individual wrongdoers to blame, Heaney advocates for hope and reconciliation. Heaney employs the story of Philoctetes' suffering, particularly his leg wound in need of a cure, as a symbolic expression of the urgent need for peace talks and settlement to take place in Northern Ireland. Thus, Heaney's take on the Troubles is subtler and less party-oriented. Attempting a direct identification between the play's protagonists and actual people or ideologies proves futile and misleading. Rather, by illustrating that pain and anguish are a shared aspect between the conflicting Northern Irish factions, Heaney finds in the eventual cure of Philoctetes' wound a powerful metaphor to express the pressing need for a communal remedy that foregrounds forgiveness over blind hatred. In fact, what is astonishing about *The Cure at Troy* is the potency and universality of its message. As will be shown, Heaney's invocation to hope proved to be extremely influential not only in the political developments in his own country and in the final peace settlements, but also on a global scale. With regard to *The Burial at Thebes*, staged in Dublin in 2004, the geopolitical context at the time when Heaney was preparing this version of *Antigon*e is totally different. With the signing of the Good-Friday Agreement signalling the termination of the Troubles in 1998, Heaney adapts another Greek play, but this time from the Republic and the Abbey. The fourteen years that separated the two times Heaney dealt with Greek tragedy brought about significant changes in Ireland, both North and South of the border. These transformations are also reflected in the overall scope of *The Burial at Thebes*. The play negotiates Ireland's broader position in the world, delving into global issues of the time such as the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush's war on terror and his infamous black-or-white rhetoric, as well as questions regarding the legitimacy and limitations of Western hegemony. Still, Heaney's adaptation of *Antigone* does not lack its peculiar Irish traits. Heaney aligns Antigone's act of buying her brother with the elaborate keening practices traditionally found in Ireland. This way, the Irish rituals surrounding death find a symbolic application in the contested body of Polyneices. Also, by having Antigone use the traditional cadence of Irish lament songs, Heaney finds a truly innovative way to Irishize his heroine. In doing so, Heaney succeeds in making *The Burial at Thebes* a part of a longstanding tradition of Irish *Antigones* that persists to the present day.

Lastly, the third chapter focuses on Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, a loose adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* that premiered in Dublin in 1998. In contrast to the other plays analyzed in this thesis, this adaptation exhibits the most significant deviations from its ancient Greek precursor. Carr completely transposes the action and setting of the Euripidean tragedy to an imaginary

bogland of the Irish Midlands, named Bog of Cats. Furthermore, Carr's protagonists differ drastically from those in the ancient tragedy, as they are the Irish residents of the bog. This is a play that delves into the Irish landscape, its mythology, and the pre-eminence of rural superstitions. Indeed, at first glance, Carr's adaptation might not display a clear resemblance to *Medea*. Upon closer inspection, however, one starts to recognize the inventive way in which Carr has applied the Medean themes of female ostracization and filicide to an indubitable Irish setting. Hester Swane, Carr's Medea-like character, is an Irish Traveller who faces persecution from the settled residents of the bog due to her peripatetic lifestyle and erratic behaviour. Together with her partner, Carthage, they have a daughter named Josie. Like Jason in the Euripidean tragedy, Carthage betrays Hester and plans to marry the young daughter of a rich farmer to secure a better future for himself. He also orders Hester to disappear from the Bog of Cats, asserting that she is perceived as a witch and a cause of distress by the rest of the populace. Hester, however, does not back down, claiming that she has a unique connection to the Bog of Cats, with no one having the right to remove her from her ancestral land. On the day of Carthage's wedding, Hester sets fire to his newly acquired farm and cattle, and then kills Josie before eventually taking her own life. This outcome provides an altogether different representation of filicide compared to Euripides' tragedy, where Medea escapes after committing the murderous deed. As we will explore in detail in the corresponding chapter, Carr offers a distinct theorization of filicide, suggesting that Hester's act of taking Josie's life is not induced by revenge but, instead, can be seen as an act of ultimate love. Overall, Carr depicts Hester as a self-empowered Irish woman who rebels against an interdependent network of patriarchy, masculine control of land, and misogyny permeating the Irish Midlands society. *By the Bog of Cats* is a compelling play that boldly addresses the numerous injustices endured by an Irish woman, who faces triple abuse from the dominant members of her community due to her sex, unmarried status, and Traveller heritage. Also, given the many liberties that Carr takes from the original Euripidean tragedy, Carr's version of *Medea* is certainly the most daring and subversive adaptation to be examined in this thesis.

Having introduced the adaptations and the playwrights under consideration, some general remarks are due about their grouping together. Notably, situating the surge of Irish interest in Greek tragedy in the early 1980s, this thesis covers the period from its onset, starting with *The Riot Act* in 1984, spanning thirty years until *The Burial at Thebes* in 2004. The inclusion of *The Cure at Troy*, staged in 1990, and *The Bog of Cats*, staged in 1998, ensures a representation of each decade within this timeframe. This is particularly crucial as it allows for a seamless understanding of the sequence of historical and cultural developments occurring in (Northern) Ireland during this period. It illustrates how the Irish reception of Greek tragedy reflected these events and how it evolved alongside these changes. Additionally, the fact that Paulin is Northern Irish, while Carr hails from the Republic, and considering Heaney's dual status – as a Northerner

who later resided in the Republic – promises a wide-ranging and equitable exploration of endemic Irish issues, whether North or South of the border. The diverse background of the chosen playwrights is also guaranteed by the presence of representatives from both major religions – Heaney and Carr have a Catholic background, Paulin a Protestant – and, of course, both sexes. A final note is that the format of the selected plays covers the entire spectrum of theatrical adaptation. This spans from works like *The Burial at Thebes*, where Heaney subtly integrates Irish elements while remaining largely faithful to the original dialogues and sequence of events of the corresponding Greek tragedy, to plays like *By the Bog of Cats*, which profoundly deviates from the plotline of *Medea*, transferring the action to a modern Irish setting, while retaining only the intangible essence of the Euripidean source-text.[15]

Therefore, irrespective of sex, religious faith, geographical and political divisions, as well as reception style, this thesis attempts to pinpoint the various ways in which divergent Irish playwrights choose to associate themselves with Greek tragedy and adapt some of its most enthralling stories for the Irish stage and public. This, in turn, will hopefully highlight not only the multitude of Irish-bound reasons of engaging with Greek tragedy, but also showcase the diverse aspects of being Irish in the world. What these adaptations achieve collectively is the establishment of a solid foundation upon which manifold Irish identity-markers are introduced, negotiated, and ultimately grounded.

[15] Brian Arkins recognizes three features of Irish reception of Greek tragedy: "the transposition of the source text (an Athenian tragedy) in the source language (Greek) to a target text (an Irish tragedy) in the target language (English) involves one of three manoeuvres: straight interlingual translation; version; loose adaptation… In the case of straight translation, the Irish translator [must] have a perfect knowledge of both the source language (Greek) and the target language (English)… In the case of a version, the Irish playwright preserves the *invariant core* of the Athenian tragedy – Oedipus must kill his father and marry his mother – but feels free to add to, subtract from, manipulate the original… In the case of loose adaptation, the Irish dramatist changes the setting to that of the modern world, but preserves some of the plotline of the Athenian original as a kind of sub-text" (2010: 25-6). Following this division, all plays discussed in this thesis fall under the category of 'version', except *By the Bog of Cats*, which is a 'loose adaptation'.

The Theory Behind Adaptation: Classical Receptions Studies, its Status and Objectives

All adaptations discussed in this thesis are part of a broader phenomenon known as the reception of antiquity. In this context, the term 'reception' signifies the ongoing process of how the Greco-Roman world, particularly its historical and cultural imprint, is received, interpreted, and assimilated by later cultures. Accordingly, the theoretical and methodological tools employed to explore the chosen adaptations are derived from the framework of Classical Reception Studies (CRS), a thriving subfield of research within the Classics domain, in which this present study situates itself. In a nutshell

> Scholars in the field of classical reception studies examine the different ways in which antiquity, a specific aspect of it or a view on it has intersected with later contexts, including contexts in antiquity itself. Studying classical reception, therefore, means looking into a vast array of questions about temporality, canonicity, aesthetics, politics, cultural infrastructure and mobility, history, memory, science. (De Pourcq, De Haan & Rijser 2020: 1)

While the upcoming analysis of the Irish theatrical plays relies mainly on close reading practices and a subsequent historico-cultural analysis of the insights derived from this process, and makes limited allusions to theoretical models, the thesis' overall argumentation takes its cues from the propositions of Classical Reception theory. Specifically, the argument that the adaptations by Paulin, Heaney, and Carr should be simultaneously regarded as contemporary versions of Greek tragedy with valid Classical relevance, while also being recognized as distinct Irish plays notwithstanding their Greek precursor, is substantiated by the theoretical insights offered by CRS.

The theoretical framework of this thesis generates a discussion that transcends the narrow interrelationship between Irish adaptation and corresponding Greek tragedy. Precisely, it stimulates a debate on how a literary text or work of art, which has a thematic debt to a given cultural artifact derived from the Greco-Roman world, is related to each other. Although this association may initially seem clear and straightforward, in reality it is more intricate and problematic than it appears on the surface. Within the field of Classics, there has been much contention about the exact nature of the relationship between classical material and its postclassical receivers. The emerging complications encompass both hermeneutic and ideological dimensions. In light of this, two central questions arise: first, how should one approach a text or another type of cultural object that, whether explicitly or not, exhibits a certain degree of affinity with Classical antiquity? Second, what does the enduring association of later artists and writers with Classical antiquity tell us about by this very era? Over time, various Classical scholars from

different schools of thought have provided contrasting responses to these inquiries. As we will see in this section, the issue is pertinent to the entire function of Classical philology as a discipline, particularly focusing on the different views that Classical scholars hold regarding its character and scholarly import.

To further clarify the matter and gain a better insight into what is at stake in the scope and direction of Classics, it is worthwhile to momentarily pause and contemplate the potential root of the problem. This necessitates some self-reflective criticism regarding the standing of Classics. It is rather tenable that, at its core, Classics is a conservative discipline, in the proper etymological sense of the word. In Latin, *conservare* means 'to conserve,' 'to keep,' 'to contain'. In other words, to maintain something or someone in its original or existing state. This is what Classical scholars have largely sought to do for centuries in relation to the Greco-Roman civilization. 'The conservation of Classical past' is a maxim that aptly captures the customary objective of Classical philology – a quest to ensure that the Greek and Latin languages and cultures are not lost or forgotten.

Yet, gradually, this presumably noble and dedicated pursuit against oblivion has been deconstructed, revealing its true dependence on a clear set of precarious theoretical beliefs. Perceiving themselves as the gatekeepers of the ancient world, a large number of Classical scholars were habitually guided by a dominant positivistic assumption dictating that the ancient world is "something fixed, whose boundaries can be shown, and whose essential nature we can understand on its own terms" (Martindale 2006: 2). This form of historical inquiry presupposes the essential conjecture that the Classical world is something static and unchangeable, always at the disposal of those with access to it, who "through the accumulation of supposedly factual data [they can] establish the-past-as-it-really-was" (*Ibid*.). The ambition of such scholars to reconstruct the Greco-Roman world exactly as it stood carried "an assumption, sometimes tacit sometimes explicit, that [classical objects] yielded a 'meaning' which was unproblematic, there to be grasped and applied in all kinds of situation far removed from the ancient one" (Hardwick 2003: 3). Hence, proponents of this perspective suppress the historical situatedness of the Classical past and the associated epistemological implications of this conception, assuming that any cultural trace from this era could still be perceived empirically, in its pure, eternal form.

Following this line of thought, it was long posited that the examination of the reception of classical material was foremostly an instrumental means of justifying the enduring influence that the Greco-Roman world continues to exert today, particularly in the Western world. Applying this argumentation to the specifics of this thesis, it follows, for example, that Carr's adaptation of *Medea* or Heaney's adaptation of *Philoctetes* are primarily a living and undeniable testament of the ongoing legacy of the Classical world, rather than two contemporary plays with intrinsic value and topical relevance. Evidently, the fact that these are two contemporary Irish playwrights who

inventively rework the Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedies as a means to convey local and exigent concerns, comes secondary to the narrowing declaration that Greek tragedy still matters and is in circulation.

Such utilitarian theorization of Classical reception material has usually been placed under the umbrella of Classical Tradition. This approach was the leading way of addressing the *Nachleben* of Classical texts and culture before CRS profoundly shifted the debate in the academy. As Lorna Hardwick elaborates:

> One strand in classical scholarship has been what was called 'the classical tradition'. This studies the transmission and dissemination of classical culture through the ages, usually with the emphasis on the influence of classical writers, artists and thinkers on subsequent intellectual movements and individual works. In this context, the language which was used to describe this influence tended to include terms like 'legacy'. This rather implied that ancient culture was dead but might be retrieved and reapplied provided that one had the necessary learning. (*Ibid*. 2)

The idea that any outcome of Classical reception is merely a by-product of a lasting Classical legacy is far from innocent. In reality, it functions as a tool to validate a direct continuum of influence and inheritance between the Greco-Roman and the contemporary Western world. An exemplary illustration of this perspective can be found in the opening statements made by Gilbert Highet in the introduction of his influential book *The Classical Traditions: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*: "Our modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome… [since] in most our intellectual and spiritual activities we are the grandsons of the Romans, and the great-grandsons of the Greeks" (1949: 1). Highet's assertion reflects the pervasive belief in the unbroken relevance and impact of Greco-Roman civilization on contemporary Western culture.

Nevertheless, there are certain underlying complications accompanying this view. As Astrid Van Weyenberg notes: "through his use of the word 'continuation' Highet establishes a direct line of influence between the contemporary Western world and Classical antiquity" (2011: 16). Such Eurocentric portrayal of Classics theorizes the Greco-Roman world simultaneously historically and a-historically: historically "as a particular moment and place of origin, from which a direct line of progress is drawn to the here and now of our contemporary Western world, [and a-historically] as a universal essence that reflects the values of the Western tradition" (*Ibid*. 18). Undoubtedly, this ideological framework has defined the Western sense of self. The self-declared kinship to Classical antiquity extends beyond the realm of Classics; it is ingrained as part of a shared heritage, manifested in everyday life. Take, for example, the frequent reference to Athens or Rome as the cradles of Western Civilization. This primarily serves as a moral justification for

the presumed pre-eminence of Western ideals and the Western way of life. It speaks more to the self-proclaimed legitimate heir to this era than it does about the true significance of the ancient civilizations themselves.

Therefore, in questioning the asserted direct line of influence from Classical antiquity to the contemporary Western world, it becomes apparent that this claimed connection is, in reality, arbitrary, extending from the present to the past, and not *vice versa*, as it is proclaimed. That is, the inheritance of the Classical past is deliberately chosen rather than somehow ceded to the West, intended to impart a sense of universal validity and cultural superiority. Shedding light on the true dynamics between Classical antiquity and the Western ideological apparatuses reveals how the Classical Tradition has predominantly handled the reception of classical material so far; as secondary items lacking intrinsic worth, merely acting as proof of the ongoing importance of an immutable ancient era. To illustrate this point further, the reception of the Classics can be metaphorically envisioned as a buoy, signalling the presence of a concealed yet theoretically vibrant and 'realer' world below.

In recent times, such views have been substantially undermined. The notions that Classical cultural objects convey an objective reality of the past and that Classical reception is solely a living proof of the grandeur of the Greco-Roman era have been strongly challenged. The following remark by Freddy Decreus is instructive of this revisionist tendency:

> The history of 'Classics', or of 'Greekness', never has been a totalizing and foundational process which, once and for all, in an unambiguous and direct way, determined the value and meaning of an ancient civilization. Despite many attempts to prove the opposite, Classics is not a grand narrative that regulates a universal truth embodied in a universal subject. On the contrary, it has always been totally dependent on a distance between worlds, it has always been living in and thanks to a gap, uniting and separating contemporary and distant societies. (2017: 263)

Scholars within the CRS tend to endorse the above assertions, considering them a critical basis for the analysis of cultural objects with any affinity to antiquity. In this vein, the starting point of a CRS methodology is the admittance that the knowledge of the Classical past is contingent and subject to change.

In alignment with this belief, Charles Martindale, a pioneer of Classical Reception theory, in his field-defining book *Redeeming the Text*, proposes a dynamic understanding of antiquity that goes against the long sustained positivistic legacy of traditional Classics. Martindale advocates instead for a provisional understanding of the Classical past, grounded in its inherently fluid and fragmented character:

> Opposed to this positivistic approach is one which might be termed textualist, post-structuralist, conventionalist, culturalist, anti-foundationalist. On this model history – the past – is an 'abscence', and can never be restored to a full presence. It is only available to us in the form of 'traces', first and foremost perhaps in the language we use, and then in the other 'texts' which surround us.[16] (1993: 20-1)

Following this theoretical proposition, CRS scholars re-evaluate the Classical past from something that *permanently is* to something that *is always becoming*. In this framework, they do not view Classical cultural artifacts as untouchable, unchanging remnants of the past with absolute, enduring significance. Instead, they recognize "the 'invention' of new traditions of the classical [as] an indicator of broader cultural dilemmas and shifts" (Hardwick 2007: 43-4). Hence, rather than remaining constant, the perception of the relationship with the Greco-Roman world is seen as dynamic and evolving:

> Reception Studies… emphasize the interactive relationship between the source culture and the receiving culture with a focus on the cultural processes that shape these relationships. It frees us from the constraints of assuming a singular normative view of Classicism. When approached through the lens of Reception Studies, the meaning behind an engagement with Classical models becomes dependent on cultural-historical processes. (Torrance & O'Rourke 2020: 16)

This truthfully marks a revolutionary moment in the intellectual history of Classicism. Studying how Classical elements are interpreted and utilized in subsequent cultural contexts and historical eras allows CRS scholars to fathom the diverse conceptualizations and meanings attributed to the Greco-Roman world over time. By analyzing how classical themes, motifs, and narratives are reimagined, adapted, and appropriated, CRS scholars are in a position to better grasp what the Greco-Roman world has meant to different people and cultures, and by this to also appreciate the boundless and divergent manifestations of Classical antiquity across the centuries. From this it follows that the cognition of the Classical past is rather malleable than set in stone. Accordingly,

[16] Essentially, Martindale applied the teachings of literary theory, specifically drawing from post-structuralism and deconstructive criticism, to the domain of Classics. While this might not appear as revolutionary now, it did signify a belated development, considering that critical theory did not permeate Classics simultaneously with other Humanities disciplines, since there was a deep-seated suspicion regarding its role and application within Classics circles: "Although discussions like these have been fundamental in the actual practice of all of the humanities over the last century, generally, they have not been the major concern of classicists. Most of the latter think that they are not touched by (critical) theory and that 'Classics' does not have to prove its credentials at all, a long-lasting Western tradition being proof enough to motivate the high standards of its value and survival. 'Theory' even became one of the most dangerous and polluting notions in a number of contemporary discussions in the field of Classics, the profession of 'theoretician' being a main term of abuse, amounting almost to a synonym for 'anti-Western'" (Decreus 2017: 250).

the reception of the Greco-Roman world does not come secondary compared to the investigation of Classical antiquity *per se*, but rather is a pivotal process for approaching the Classical world itself. In fact, Classical reception seems to be the only viable means of associating with an otherwise *absent* Classical past.[17]

In this line of thinking, Classical reception products like the Irish adaptations are seen as imbued with Classical relevance, offering a conditional but effective gateway to Greek tragedy. Such an understanding necessitates that any attempt to approach the Classical past is a mediated, situated, and contingent process firmly affected by the active role played by the receiver. This view resonates with Martindale's assertions that "our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected" (1993: 7), and that, ultimately, "Meaning… is always realized at the point of reception" (*Ibid*. 3).[18] The idea that any kind of epistemic claim or aesthetic judgment resides within the receiver, whether an actual reader or an artist offering a new interpretation of the source, unfetters Classical reception from the passive role of merely marking the limits of an established 'legacy' or 'tradition'.[19] Instead, reception becomes an active participant in the production of meaning, attaining a significant epistemological stature.

To express it more schematically: within a CRS epistemic discourse, knowledge of Greek tragedy is inseparable from knowledge of the way it has been received through time. This implies

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[17] Mindful of this notional oddity, Joshua Billings calls for an *erotics of reception*, conceptually comparing our engagement with the Classical past to Eros' definition as both 'lack and resource', as elaborated in Plato's *Symposium*: "Such a perspective would be sensitive not only to the ways the classical world is present in modernity, but also to the ways it is experienced as absent. It would understand engagement with the untimeliness of antiquity – not its timelessness or universality – as the genuinely productive force in classical reception. The reflection on alterity establishes a dialectic of lack and resource that leads to a productive relation to antiquity. One can figure the negative element of this erotics in many ways: misremembering and erasure, historical incompleteness, the impossibility of translation, traumatic loss and repression… What unifies these approaches is a close attention to the complex ways ancient works are appropriated, experienced as alien and made into one's own. The process, these studies show, is always conditioned by a desire that makes the relation to the ancient past simultaneously an imperative and an impossibility" (2010: 21-22).

[18] Martindale's theorization of Classical reception, and the overall signification of 'reception' as a concept and heuristic tool, owes a great deal to the groundbreaking work of three major theoreticians: Hans Robert Jauss' *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), Wolfang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), and Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960). All three have played a pivotal role in the development of Reception studies as a field within the Humanities, and, by extension, in shaping Classical Reception.

[19] Brian Arkins gives an extra reason why such terminology is problematic to use in relation to Classical reception and its products: "It is important to understand the dynamics lying behind the process of using Athenian tragedies. We tend to glibly employ terms such as 'tradition', 'influence', 'legacy', 'heritage', when we are talking about the use made by modern writers of Greek material. But the metaphors involved in those terms suggest a *passive* process, whereas, from the point of view of the modern writer, the process is, rather, *active*" (2010:24).

a "dialogic model, where ancient and modern provide mutual illumination of each other" (Martindale 2013: 177). For instance, applying this dialogic model to Paulin's *The Riot Act*, it follows that there is a certain reciprocity between source-text and adapted version. This two-fold motion suggests that the given Irish adaptation can properly illuminate different facets of Sophocles' *Antigone* that have remained obscured or unintelligible so far, also bringing forth new perspectives and interpretations of the Greek tragedy that resonate with modern audiences. Similarly, a holistic analysis of *The Riot Act* cannot be attained without some familiarity with its source-text, and without contrasting the two works with each other.[20] This way, the Irish references and allusions present in Paulin's adaptation are evaluated within their appropriate contextual framework. Essentially, CRS encourages a comparative model, where original tragedy and adapted version are perceived as equally co-dependent on each other.

Now, narrowing the focus from the overall workings of Classical reception to the particularities of the relationship between an original Greek tragedy and a subsequent theatrical play based on it, some extra remarks about adaptation theory are warranted. Theoretical discussions about the nature of adaptations were long dominated by the so-called fidelity discourse. "This is a critical practice that implicitly or explicitly gives cultural and aesthetic precedence to the 'source' to which the adaptation is then judged either faithful or unfaithful – that is, good or bad" (Bortolotti & Hutcheon 2007: 445). The rhetoric of fidelity prioritizes faithfulness to the source as the sole defining criterion for adaptations. Following this logic, Seamus Heaney's *Burial at Thebes* that tracks closely the corresponding text of Sophocles' *Antigone*, is considered by default a more successful adaptation than Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats*, which radically diverges from the plotline of Euripides' *Medea*.

This understanding leads to a problematic, if not unsophisticated, critical approach, as the fidelity discourse suggests that evaluations of adaptations should focus exclusively on the similarities and not on the differences or any other modifications or additions that the adaptor decides to make. It implies that adaptations must closely resemble the original to be deemed valid or successful, as if the original work possesses an inherent substance that is irreplaceable, and without exact replication, an adaptation will fail to rightfully earn that label. Seen from a Classical studies prism, this claim goes hand in hand with the essentialist views held within Classical Tradition concerning the fixed nature of the Classical past. Additionally, due to adapted stories being sourced from existing material rather than created from scratch, there is a false assumption

[20] Clare Foster makes an interesting case about this obligatory juxtaposition, actually expanding its range, arguing that "The reperformed text of a classical 'work' implicitly gathers into dramatic co-presence not only those whom it is addressing in the present, and those it originally addressed in the past, but also all those who have engaged with its revival since then. The consequently monumental text gathers this temporal diaspora, and channels the drama of its narrative. It is a very large conceptual auditorium in which one sits to what is now called in many countries and languages a 'Greek play' (2020: 43).

that adaptations only borrow and never contribute to the source material. This results to the misleading conjecture that the connection between Greek source-text and Irish adaptation functions as a one-way flow of influence.

CRS scholars severely contest this hierarchical way of viewing the relationship of an ancient play with its contemporary rendition, advocating instead for a horizontal mode of communication. By suspending considerations of fidelity or genealogy, one recognizes that, on a macroscopic level, both the original and adapted versions are two texts engaged in a continuous, synchronic dialogue. Thus, perceiving this relationship horizontally, one does not need to rely anymore on restrictive hierarchical structures. Instead, the focus shifts to revealing the interdependence that defines all texts in terms of meaning construction. Meaning is not confined to a single *locus*; rather, it occupies the space between a text and all other texts that relate to it in some explicit or implicit way. In line with this perspective, Van Weyenberg argues:

> The term 'adaptation' best succeeds in preserving the notion of an ongoing and mutual process, rather than a one-directional line of influence… Something that is adapted, through the two-directional process of adaptation, inevitably changes… Adaptation manages to convey the sense in which the pre-text is itself a changing object. (Van Weyenberg 2011: 22)

Understanding adaptation primarily as a process of creation, rather than solely as an end product, allows CRS scholars to express more accurately the dynamic and reciprocal nature of textual transformation. Every coming adaptation possesses the power to influence our perceptions of a given original tragic text, shattering old beliefs, and opening new interpretative pathways. In the same way that Greek tragedy lends its themes to the Irish adaptors, the latter give back a renewed vitality and relevance to the ancient narratives, enriching them with contemporary perspectives and cultural resonances. Such theorization facilitates a deeper comprehension of the intricate relationship between source material and its adapted forms, fostering analyses that are less dogmatic and free from deceptive considerations of superiority based on antecedence or any other arbitrary form of evaluation.

To revert the discussion back to the features of the present study, this thesis seeks to contribute to the ongoing theoretical discussions on Classical reception and its mechanisms in the following way: it proposes a paradigmatic case study that illustrates how products of Classical reception, such as the selected Irish adaptations, are deeply embedded within the literary history of the host country. As it will be showcased in detail in the following three chapters, all adaptations are actively involved with the theatrical traditions of Ireland. Specifically, the plays under scrutiny will be revealed to possess their own distinct Irish identity, separate from the Greek precursor, which ultimately leads to their integration into the historical and cultural milieu of the country

and society in which they were created. Through an in-depth analysis of the plays by Paulin, Heaney, and Carr, it will become evident how they draw upon Ireland's rich theatrical heritage, folklore, language, and socio-political context to create works that resonate deeply with Irish audiences. In doing so, it will be demonstrated how they embody unique expressions of the Irish spirit and ethos.

Consequently, from a CRS standpoint, this study will exemplify how the definitive aim of any research on products of Classical reception is not to exhibit an artwork's passive dependency on the Greco-Roman source, but rather to explore how, given an artwork's Classical underpinnings, this can lead to its dynamic assimilation within the cultural landscape and creative evolution of the receiving society. Same way, an adaptation's thematic debt to the Classical past must not be perceived as an interpretative limitation, but rather as a springboard for unleashing innovative contemporary reimagining and radical topicality.

Between the Classics and the Irish: Target Audience and Some Required Clarifications

A final question that necessitates attention before delving into the analysis of the theatrical plays is identifying the intended audience of this research. In other words, who is the addressee of this thesis? Arguably, this examination straddles the realms of Classical studies and Irish studies. While these two subjects are not mutually exclusive, it is uncommon for the same person to exhibit an equal interest in both. Observing this discrepancy, I intended to make this thesis appealing to both Classicists and Irish scholars. To this end, I wanted any reader with limited knowledge of Greek tragedy or Irish literature not to be put off by this, and to be able to follow the main argumentation without serious impediments. For this reason, in the coming chapters, whenever I consider it necessary, I offer short summaries of the implicated Greek tragedies or other insights related to them and Greek culture in general. Similarly, as needed, I go on to explain certain historical incidents or mythological aspects already known to those into Irish studies but probably unfamiliar to anyone outside of that field. The reason for this is to provide context and understanding for readers who may not be accustomed with these topics.

Embracing this comprehensive approach also entails recognizing the wide range of scholars within the disciplines of Classics and Irish studies, to whom this thesis may seem valuable. To provide an overview: numerous scholars in Classics may not have yet ventured into the realm of Classical reception, making this thesis a good introductory resource for them. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of scholars interested in Classical reception are not yet familiar with its manifestations within Irish contexts. The present examination could serve as an entry point into this pulsating practice. Lastly, there are researchers dedicated to the examination of Irish theatre, who lack the heuristic tools to approach the selected adaptations from a CRS perspective. This study addresses this need and enhances their understanding of these plays. In all respects, this thesis was written with the explicit goal of being accessible and inclusive, aiming to reach a diverse audience of scholars who may find it of interest. I expect that this broad-ranging strategy did not detract from the overall readability of the thesis. Finally, on a personal note, *When Dionysus Lands on Erin* is a truly interdisciplinary work that reflects my dual training in Classics and Literary studies. The conception, method of argumentation, and proposed findings of the thesis are all informed by the two disciplines I have pursued over the years.

Moving now to some necessary clarifications about what to expect in the following chapters. First, the chapter division follows a chronological order. Paulin's *The Riot Act* is chronologically the oldest adaptation, so this chapter comes first. Heaney's (counting his oldest play) and Carr's chapters follow. In fact, a significant point to consider while reading the chapters concerns the terminology employed. I interchangeably use the words 'adaptation', 'version',

'revision', 'retelling', 'reimagining', 'rendition', and 'appropriation' to refer to the selected Irish plays. Although I am aware of the linguistic debate within CRS circles about the different nuances that these words carry, I eventually found it fruitless to apply them to this thesis, preferring to keep things simple. Any of the aforementioned terms refers to the same thing: a contemporary Irish play that bears a thematic debt, whether large or small, to a Greek tragedy.

Another word-related issue to keep in mind is the distinction between the titles of Greek tragedies and their protagonists. Whenever *Philoctetes*, *Medea*, and *Antigone* are italicized, I refer to the respective Greek tragedy. When not italicized, I refer to the protagonists of the plays themselves. One more distinction that readers should bear in mind, especially if not widely familiar with ancient Greece, is the differentiation between, for example, the tragedy of *Medea* and the myth of Medea. The first is the theatrical play written by Euripides, which dramatizes the story of Medea. On the other hand, the myth of Medea encompasses the broader traditional narrative surrounding the character of Medea. It includes various versions and retellings of her story across different sources, such as epic poems, lyric poetry, and other forms. The myth of Medea predates the written tragedies and encompasses a wider range of events and interpretations surrounding her character and actions beyond what is portrayed in any single tragic play. The same, of course, applies to Sophocles' *Antigone*, and the myth of Antigone; Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and the myth of Philoctetes.

The distinction between a Greek tragedy and its surrounding myth also presented a challenge during my analysis of the Irish adaptations. In most cases, I was not able to determine whether Paulin, Heaney, and Carr were acquainted with the broader mythical narratives of Antigone, Medea, and Philoctetes, or if they were only familiar with the Greek tragic plays. This limitation did not significantly impact my analysis of the Irish adaptations, but it should nonetheless be noted. Also, it was not possible to track the specific translation sources used by Carr. Given her known lack of training in ancient Greek, it is certain that she had to rely on English translations to produce her adaptation. However, it was not possible to determine which translation(s) she relied upon. Again, this limitation did not significantly impact my analyses of her play, but, for the record, it should be acknowledged. Also, unless otherwise noted, all direct translations in the thesis from ancient Greek to English are mine.

One final limitation of this thesis pertains to its breadth. Due mostly to space constraints, I have deliberately chosen not to delve into any aspect of the performance history of the selected adaptations. This includes, among other things, any mention of stage directions, directorial choices, costume choices, or set design. This is not to imply that this aspect does not warrant critical attention, since every theatrical play is inextricably linked by its performance. On the other hand, by foregrounding a textual analysis of the chosen plays, I intend to exhibit a deeper understanding of how reception takes place at the level of language. Every theatrical work

inherently contains a literary dimension, given that it is made of written text. Written language is fundamental in the creation, presentation, and transmission of theatrical works. Therefore, with a focus on textual analysis and treating the chosen adaptations foremostly as written works rather than performance pieces, my aspiration is to delve into the intricacies of language and its role in shaping and determining the Irish reception of Greek tragedy. What this thesis aims to demonstrate in its entirety is that the Irishization of the stories of Antigone, Medea, and Philoctetes is both bound and conquered by language. Ultimately, the reception of Greek tragedy on Irish grounds is a language affair.

I would also like to highlight that, during the writing of this thesis, I produced some papers and book contributions that draw on the following chapters. In most cases, the relationship between my thesis and these publications is straightforward and does not require further clarification, as I directly cite my own work. However, there are a few instances where these publications include paraphrased or summarized material from my thesis, specifically certain passages and ideas that are explored in greater detail here. To provide a clear overview: pages 45-49, 52-53, and 69-73 of Chapter I allude to my article "A Friend in Need Is a Friend Indeed: Tom Paulin's Rescuing of Antigone's Afterlife" (pp. 429-448; especially pp. 433-9 and 442-6), included in the collected volume *Friendship in Ancient Greek Thought and Literature* (2023). In these parts I discuss the intellectual debate over Antigone's place in Ireland between Tom Paulin and Conor Cruise O'Brien, as well as the special usage of the word 'wild' in Ireland and in W. B. Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916'. Additionally, there is a correspondence between pages 91, 94-6, 102-3, and 133-7 of Chapter II and my article "When Hope and History Finally Rhyme: Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* and the Afterlife of a Verse" (pp. 9-29; especially pp. 9-13 and 15-20), included in the *Journal of The Lucas Graduate Conference* (vol. 9) (2021). There I discuss Seamus Heaney's decision to adapt Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the challenges he faced, and the subsequent success of the central reconciliatory message of *The Cure at Troy* in Northern Ireland and abroad. Finally, there is a thematic correspondence between pages 169-72, 178, 183-4, 201-2, and 206-11 of Chapter III and my article "Kill Like Medea, But With Love This Time: Marina Carr's Take on Filicide in *By the Bog of Cats*" (pp. 1-15; especially pp. 4, 6-11, 13-4), included in *Postgraduate English* (vol. 43) (2022). The shared aspects between the two texts pertain to Hester Swane's characterization and her peculiar upbringing, the symbolism of the Irish Midlands bog, the conceptualization of filicide as a liberating act, and the differing understandings of land proprietorship between the opposing characters in the play.

CHAPTER I

Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*: The Irish Troubles Through the Lens of Greek Tragedy

A Northern Irish Among the Greeks: *The Riot Act* as Tom Paulin's One-hit Wonder

Born in Leeds in 1949 and raised in Belfast, Tom Paulin is an author who resists strict categorization. A poet, playwright, and political essayist, Paulin's dual identity as an artist and public intellectual follows a parallel trajectory. Paulin's creative output is regularly informed by his political convictions, whereas his quite intricate political ideology becomes more intelligible with a meticulous study of his poetic and theatrical work. Whether in verse or prose, the dominant themes of Paulin's literary work expose his political stance in an array of matters. With such a versatile disposition, the evaluation of Paulin's works invites a similar approach: one must probe and expose the reciprocal connections between art and politics central to Paulin's writings to fully capture his complex nature as a thinker and writer.

Yet, if there is one constant in Paulin's career, it is his preoccupation with the political developments in Northern Ireland. Reaching adulthood at the time the Troubles began, Paulin's growth as a man of letters went hand in hand with the ongoing turmoil in Northern Ireland.[1] This fact stands out even more considering that Paulin ended up spending the biggest part of the Troubles away from home: "Despite the fact that he had attended Hull and Oxford Universities and that he was teaching at Nottingham University in 1981, Paulin's writing still focused on the North (Richtarik 1995: 104-5). With his political writing and creative work, Paulin directly addresses the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, without hesitating to identify and condemn the practices and perpetrators that he thinks responsible for the blood-stained struggle in the North.

Paulin's interest in Greek tragedy is rooted in those grounds. *The Riot Act*, subtitled 'A version of Sophocles' *Antigone*', marks the first time that Paulin produces a play with a Greek ancestry. Staged on 19 September 1984, *in medias res* of the Troubles, *The Riot Act* evokes the fierce political climate of its time and the sectarian division in the North. The play premiered in Derry, the city best known as the birthplace of the Troubles, further underscoring the

[1] Paulin's familial ties with Northern Ireland come from the side of his mother, whose birthplace is Belfast. Looking back at his ancestors, we learn that "His grandfather had been a Presbyterian elder, and his grandmother served as a nurse in Carson's army, which helped to resist the home rule tide and kept Ulster (or at least part of it) British. His father, however, was an outsider, an Englishman who had moved to Belfast to become headmaster of a school there" (Richtarik 1995: 4).

spatiotemporal relevance of *The Riot Act* to the Troubles. The play was part of "a double bill with Derek Mahon's adaptation of Moliere's *L'Ecole des Maris* (as *High Times*)" (Murray 1991: 120), brought to the Northern Irish stage by the Field Day Theatre Company.[2] Yet, of the two plays, it was Paulin's reworking of *Antigone* that grabbed most attention from both audience and critics, as its topical resonance to contemporary Northern Ireland decisively contributed to this.[3]

Paulin's fascination with Greek tragedy does not start and finish with *Antigone*. Actually, *The Riot Act* is part of an unofficial trilogy, as Paulin has dealt with Greek tragedy two more times. Besides his adaption of *Antigone*, Paulin has written *Seize the Fire* (1990), which is a version of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, followed by *Euripides' Medea* (2010), named after the eponymous tragedy. Although exclusively comprised of dialogues, *Seize the Fire* does not strictly count as a theatrical play. As Isabel Torrance notes: "*Seize the Fire* was commissioned as the basis for a film that would form part of a second-year course on fifth-century BCE Athens run by the Open University" (2021: 281). The film was aired on BBC2 in February 1989, and a year after the published text followed. Unlike *The Riot Act* and its thematic fixity to the Troubles, "The political span of *Seize the Fire* is far broader, alluding to various oppressive regimes and applying itself to the whole of humanity" (*Ibid*. 285).[4] As for Paulin's adaptation of *Medea*, this was first performed on 2 February 2010, at the Oxford Playhouse. Utilizing the status of Medea as a stranger in a foreign land, Paulin's rendition of Euripides' tragedy "played to the theme of immigrant experiences in British culture" (*Ibid*. 290). Curiously, none of the two plays has left a mark, commercially speaking or within academia. Besides Torrance's recent article, the critical attention cast on them is scant. Something that is not true about *The Riot Act*, which is one of the most discussed Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy to date.

Given the disproportionate scholarly attention allocated to the trilogy, one could reasonably argue that, in terms of his engagement with Greek tragedy, *The Riot Act* stands out as Paulin's one-hit wonder. Without wholly diminishing the artistic value and political impact of the other two plays, *The Riot Act* is surely the attempt that Paulin is most known for and the subject of numerous subsequent analyses. It seems that the retelling of Antigone's story hit a special

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[2] A full section dedicated to the history, workings, and cultural imprint of the Field Day Theatre Company is included in the chapter on Seamus Heaney.

[3] As Fiona Macintosh notes, *The Riot* Act "courted controversy even during rehearsal when the director, Simon Stokes, was given the sack and the actor playing Creon (and a Field Day Director) Stephen Rea took over the direction. This is an angry play, and there is a shocking savagery about Creon's demotic language that is shaped by a brutalized world" (2011: 92).

[4] In a short comment about the play, Brian Arkins lists that "Important in Paulin are the title, the epigraph, and the prevailing brevity. Paulin's title *Seize the Fire* directs us not to Prometheus' imprisonment by Zeus, but to his providing human beings with the crucial gift of fire. Paulin's epigraph from Marx also stresses the importance of Prometheus as a champion of mankind, as a kind of humanist saint: 'Prometheus is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher's calendar'" (2010: 130).

nerve; something that the other two stories of Prometheus or Medea did not manage to do, at least with respect to Irish matters. This asymmetry requires further explanation. As it will be argued in this chapter, *The Riot Act* was put in the limelight because of the imaginative way that Paulin associated the powerful Antigonean thematics with the main events and protagonists of the Troubles. Specifically, Antigone's decision to bury her brother Polyneices against state rules, and the subsequent repercussions that culminate in her death sentence, are transformed into a symbolic parallel for the ongoing cycle of violence in the North. Similarly, Creon, the Theban king that sentences Antigone to death, is portrayed by Paulin as the equivalent of an authoritarian politician obsessed with the maintenance of the *status quo* in Northern Ireland. As Murray comments: "that we are in Belfast and Thebes simultaneously is the premise of this version" (1991: 121). Upon witnessing the play, the original audience of *The Riot Act* could identify the play's characters as the main perpetrators of the sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. Additionally, by having his characters speak in a distinct Hiberno-English dialect, Paulin managed to resonate on stage the nuanced language of the conflict spoken daily in the streets.

Paulin's main preoccupation with political violence can be sensed by his choice to change the title of the Sophoclean tragedy and rename it *The Riot Act*. To 'read someone the riot act' is an expression that means to berate an individual or a group of people for their unruly behaviour. Apart from its everyday usage, the phrase has an underlying history: originally, the Riot Act was "an English statute of 1715 providing that if twelve or more persons assemble unlawfully and riotously, to the disturbance of the public peace, and refuse to disperse within an hour upon proclamation of the statute by a competent authority, they shall be considered guilty of felony" (qtd. in Harkin 2008: 308). To invoke the law, the police authorities had to read out loud the proclamation below:

> Our sovereign lord the King chargeth and commandeth all persons, being assembled, immediately to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations, or to their lawful business, upon the pains contained in the act made in the first year of King George, for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies. God save the King. (qtd. in Remoundou-Howley 2011: 123)

The Riot Act was not unknown to the Irish, as it was "used by British authorities to quell 'disturbances' in Ireland" (Harkin 2008: 308). Paulin accomplishes a dual purpose with his choice of title, effectively capturing the inherently conflictual relationship between political authority and civil disobedience, while subtly alluding to British rule in Ireland. In doing so, he sets the tone for a retelling of *Antigone* that seeks to mirror the unsettling political reality in Northern Ireland.

As it will be made clear in more detail, *The Riot Act* must be read against the backdrop of the Troubles in order to be fully comprehensible. This amounts to both the reasons that urged

Paulin to deal with *Antigone* in the first place as well as for the very content of his adaptation. In the following section, we will explore how Paulin's interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy did not arise in isolation but was instead influenced by a longstanding debate regarding Antigone's place in Northern Irish affairs. Specifically, we will examine how *The Riot Act* serves as a polemical response to previous influential readings of the tragedy by Irish intellectuals.

A Friend Turned Foe: Conor Cruise O'Brien and the Fight Over Antigone's Reputation

Commenting on the reasons that he was drawn to *Antigone* in the first place, Paulin gives a compelling remark: "It was a play that belonged in Ireland." (2002: 166). The assertiveness of Paulin's claim is noteworthy. In 1984, the same year that *The Riot Act* was staged, two more Irish playwrights, Brendan Kennelly and Aidan Carl Mathews, were preparing their own versions of the tragedy. The astonishing production of three *Antigones* in one calendar year did not remain unnoticed. Since then, most critics tend to examine these versions together, investigating the socio-political causes that triggered the plethora of Irish *Antigones* in such a short time interval.[5]

Yet, when Paulin made his claim about *Antigone's* firm place in Ireland, he had something else in mind. The avowal that *Antigone* belongs in Ireland is not based on current events, but rather on incidences happening in the past. The appraisal of Sophocles' tragedy has a history that predates 1984. What Paulin concealed in his succinct statement about *Antigone*, is that the female protagonist of the tragedy was not exactly revered by those who first thought that her tragic story applies to Ireland. On the contrary, Antigone's *exemplum* of defiance against the law and the imminent consequences of this transgression were read as a cautionary tale about the domestic chaos that awaits Ireland, and especially the Northern part, if Antigone were allowed to enter politics there.

To give a clearer idea, Anthony Roche historically contextualises the entry of *Antigone* into Northern Irish politics, without omitting to reveal the man responsible for this development: "The first person to draw the comparison between events in the North of Ireland and Sophocles' *Antigone* was diplomat-critic Conor Cruise O'Brien. He did so very early on, in October 1968, within the same month as a Civil Rights march was set upon by the Ulster police" (1988: 222). Leaving momentarily aside any mentions about Conor Cruise O'Brien and the details of his reading of the tragedy, the date that Roche indicates cannot be overlooked. 5 October 1968 is widely considered as the day the Troubles began. The spark was lit at the Civil Rights march that took place in Derry and ended up in riots between the protesters and the police forces. In theory, the Civil Rights march was a peaceful protest demanding an end to gerrymandering and to job

[5] Christopher Murray provides an excellent recapitulation of the *Antigone* frenzy in Ireland: "The coincidence of three versions of *Antigone* in the Irish theatre within months of each other calls for special comment… I suggest that the imaginations of these three poets, Kennelly, Paulin and Mathews, none of them more than an amateur dramatist, were attracted to the Antigone myth through an apocalyptic vision of political and social events in Ireland, North and South, in 1984. This was the year of the New Ireland Forum *Report;* the year of the Criminal Justice Bill; the year of the Kerry Babies' Case; the year after the failure of the abortion debate and the year before the sequel, the debate on divorce which ended in a crushing defeat for liberal opinion in Ireland. 1984, accordingly, was an appropriate year for Antigone to walk forth and state her 'non serviam' to the Irish establishment" (1991: 128-9).

and housing inequalities faced by many residents in the North (the majority of them disenfranchised Catholics).[6] However, its violent conclusion precipitated the sectarian division that erupted in the following decades, taking the form of a national questioning over Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. Although more information will follow about the fateful Derry march and its wider implications in the subsequent thirty-year impasse, it is notable that Antigone's name entered the public discourse in Ireland on the onset of the Troubles. That is, more than fifteen years before Paulin produced *The Riot Act*.

At the time the Troubles broke out, Conor Cruise O'Brien was a leading public intellectual in Ireland. Like Paulin, he was a man of many interests. A politician and a diplomat, a journalist and an academic, a historian as well as a playwright, O'Brien was enjoying recognition in diverse fields. Born in Dublin in 1917, one year after the Easter Rising, O'Brien had experienced first-hand all major developments that took place in Ireland during the course of the 20th century: the partition of the island and the establishment of the Irish Free state in 1922 as a consequence of the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, De Valera's 1937 Constitution and the change of the country's name to *Éire* (Ireland), and finally the outbreak of the Troubles that brought forward the claim of Ireland's unification with the creation of a new all-Ireland state and the termination of British rule in the North. From all these occurrences, O'Brien was more directly involved with the latter: although originally a moderate sympathizer of the nationalist cause, 'the Cruiser', as his nickname was, shifted sides over the 1970s and steadily became an advocate of the Unionist position and the two-state solution in Ireland.

Interestingly, Paulin's first point of contact with O'Brien is cordial. Paulin seems to initially espouse O'Brien's views about the maintenance of the *status quo* in Northern Ireland. Although never a hard-line Unionist himself, Paulin was persuaded by O'Brien's argumentation in favour of Ireland's partition. To provide a testimony of Paulin's early rapport with O'Brien:

> Until about 1980 I… believed what most Ulster Protestants still believe – that Northern Ireland was, and ought to remain, permanently wedded to Great Britain. Although I had always hated Ulster Unionism very bitterly and supported the Civil Rights movement from the beginning, I believed that civil rights and greater social justice in Northern Ireland could be achieved within the contexts of the United Kingdom… As the situation hardened, I reacted like most members of the Unionist middle class and believed that Conor Cruise O'Brien was putting 'our case'. (Paulin 1984: 16)

Furthermore, in a 2003 interview preceding the restaging of *The Riot Act* in London, Paulin opens up once again about his early admiration of O'Brien:

[6] The numerous Civil Rights marches that took place in Ireland at the time were inspired by the US Civil Rights movement and its iconic leader, Martin Luther King.

> As a student in England, I followed obsessively what was happening in the North of Ireland, the civil rights campaign to bring democracy and equality (one man, one vote) to all the population. The failure of that non-violent campaign led to Loyalist violence, followed (that verb is crucial) by Republican violence (the first RUC constable killed by terrorists in the North of Ireland was murdered by Loyalists). Somewhere in the middle, I supported neither side. I admired the writings of the Irish intellectual Conor Cruise O'Brien, who for several years was editor-in-chief of *The Observer*, and wrote a weekly column which often denounced Irish nationalist values and actions, as well as the attitude of certain southern Irish politicians towards IRA violence. (2003)

The above extracts are illustrative of Paulin's initial alignment with O'Brien. Paulin shares O'Brien's conviction that the border in Ireland is a necessary evil. Yet soon an ideological rift would occur between the two men. No doubt, O'Brien's alleged misreading of *Antigone* in the context of the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland proved catalytic in widening the gap between them. Before touching on this, however, it is it crucial to take a closer look at Paulin's own ideological upbringing and transformation from a self-professed 'moderate Unionist' to an adherent of Irish Republicanism. This way, Paulin's disillusionment with O'Brien will be better understood.

Tracing the formation of Paulin's ideology, Anthony Roche explains that Paulin is not the typical Nationalist supporter that predominantly defines himself against the Unionist 'Other'; instead, Paulin possesses a vision of a unified Ireland where those sectarian divisions will cease to exist:

> Paulin himself does not slot conveniently into the dividing categories so favoured in the North. He was born in England [but] he was raised in the North as a Protestant Unionist when his parents returned there; and in the late 1970s he changed sides, switching allegiances from his Unionist heritage, not so much to its Catholic counter-image as to a utopian vision of nationalist identity that would reconcile Protestant Dissenter and Catholic Republican. (1988: 221)

Paulin seems aware that his political ideas are somewhat unconventional: "My own critical position is eclectic and is founded on an idea of identity which has as yet no formal or institutional existence. It assumes the existence of a non-sectarian, republican state which comprises the whole island of Ireland" (1984: 17). A critic of Paulin would readily judge this statement as

baseless or flimsy. In truth, however, there seems to be a certain historical precedent on which Paulin bases his vision of a non-sectarian unified Ireland. The following excerpts by Marilynn Richtarik and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews point to this:

> Paulin believed that the Protestants did not have a proper sense of themselves as a distinct people with a historical identity. Rereading history, he fastened upon the abortive revolution of 1798 as an opportunity Protestants missed to unite with Catholics in a shared Irish identity. Modern-day unionists, he felt, were insufficiently aware of the radical republican element of their heritage. (Richtarik 1995: 107)

> Just as Yeats had his imaginary Ireland, so Paulin has his 'platonic' republic founded on a myth of Protestant radicalism deriving from a highly selective historical memory which centres on the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798. The 1798 rebellion occupies a central place in Paulin's imagination, representing for him the possibility of a union between Ulster Presbyterian and Irish Catholic who, placing rational ideals of political independence and self-determination above considerations of religious denomination, fought side by side for the republican cause. (Kennedy-Andrews 2013: 183)

Paulin's Republicanism is essentially secular. He considers the possibility of a unified Ireland, where religion differences will no longer matter, at least in national consciousness formation. As improbable as this sounds, Paulin envisages a situation where both Catholics and Protestants will put their differences aside and construct a common identity together. "The priority for Paulin is a social democratic Irish republic, founded on equality of citizenship and the civic institutions of the just state, and capable of transcending inherited colonial and religious divisions**"** (*Ibid*.).[7] For this to occur, the identification of the Ulster Protestants with the British national identity and culture must be put to a halt. As Paulin admits in an interview: "it was really only after 1979 or 1980 that I realised the fundamental flaws in the structure of the Northern Irish state could only be redressed if the link with Britain was broken or at least attenuated" (Marshall & MacCabe 2000: 97). Although all historico-cultural developments indicated that this is an unlikely scenario, for Paulin it remained a prerequisite for the establishment of a unified Irish state, and ultimately, for the termination of the Troubles.

[7] Patricia Horton notes that allusions of Paulin's imaginary republic can be found in his poetry as well: "Paulin's secular republic is envisioned utopically in *Liberty Tree*. Poems like 'The Book of Juniper' uphold Enlightenment ideals, the dream of 'that sweet/ equal republic'" (2002: 315).

Overall, one could rightly argue that it would be difficult to find two more diametrically opposed personalities than O'Brien's and Paulin's. Especially regarding Northern Ireland and the Troubles, O'Brien's cold-blooded pragmatism finds no point of correspondence with Paulin's fervent utopianism. For O'Brien, the partition of Ireland is non-negotiable; any political advancement needs to foremostly abide to this arrangement. For Paulin, on the other hand, Northern Ireland is a failed state in need of disbanding.[8] The following extract taken from a comparative essay Paulin wrote about the shared cultural struggle in Palestine, South Africa, and Northern Ireland is indicative of this:

> Here I would like to say a little about my personal experience of becoming involved in a cultural struggle that was and is also a political struggle, and that is the struggle to articulate a central political fact – the Northern Irish State or statelet, established in the Downing Street peace talks in 1921, had failed. The extent and depth of that failure was hard to perceive or accept, for those Protestants, like myself, who could remember the IRA campaign in the 1950s, and who were fundamentally opposed to the paramilitary violence, which has caused such suffering. One prominent defender of that Northern Irish State was a then well-known writer and intellectual, Conor Cruise O'Brien, who put his revisionist guilt about the excesses of traditional Irish nationalism at the service of the beleaguered state. (2005: 10-11)

Paulin's tirade against O'Brien is suggestive of the chasm separating them. Paulin cannot digest how a Northern Protestant like himself eventually comes to acknowledge the systemic injustice fostered by the Northern Irish state, whereas a Southern Catholic like O'Brien refuses to see it.

Seen from another angle though, Paulin and O'Brien have something in common that is hard to deny. Essentially, both men go against the grain of the expectations of the ethnoreligious group they originate from. Paulin, though a Northern Protestant, ended up a Republican, whereas O'Brien gradually embraced Unionism, notwithstanding his Southern Catholic roots. That is, both intellectuals took the opposite political pathway from the one they were expected to follow. As Joe Cleary comments:

[8] Interviewed by John Haffenden, Paulin openly questions the legitimacy of the Northern Irish state: "what I find at the moment is a real sense of how fundamentally ridiculous and contradictory it is to be an Ulster Protestant. It's a culture which could have dignity, and it had it once – I mean that strain of radical Presbyterianism… which more or less went underground after 1798. I pretty well despise official Protestant culture, and can't now understand how people can simultaneously wave the Union Jack and yet hate the English, as many Protestants do. I think there really *has* to be a united Ireland, and I don't mean in any way that I'm committed to bloodshed – but it is a fundamentally absurd political state, and it's got to go" (1981: 159).

> Having campaigned against Partition some decades earlier, O'Brien went on (after the Troubles erupted in Northern Ireland) to become a vigorous champion of state right and to adopt an increasingly rigid pro-union line, eventually joining the U.K. Unionist Party. On one level at least, then, Paulin's version of *Antigone* can be read as part of the northerner's ongoing imaginative engagement with O'Brien, a southerner whose intellectual migration from Irish nationalism to Ulster unionism ran in an inverse direction to Paulin's own political development. (199: 523)

O'Brien and Paulin thus embrace the political position that the other has rejected. This may well explain the mutual dislike: each man is a reminder of the other man's apostasy. What requires further explanation is the role that *Antigone* plays in all this.

Having laid out the ideological foundation of their clash, let us now take a closer look at the very incident that perpetually damaged Paulin's relationship with O'Brien. This was a lecture that O'Brien gave at Queen's University in Belfast, in the wake of the riotous Civil Rights march in Derry. In front of a socialist-oriented student audience comprised of both Catholics and Protestants, O'Brien brought up the story of Antigone's disrespect of Creon's edict to contemplate whether civil disobedience is an effective tool for social change. O'Brien initially adopts an ambivalent stance. He is not sure whether Antigone's *exemplum* is commendable or not:

> We should be safer without the troublemaker from Thebes. And that which would be lost, if she could be eliminated, is quite intangible. No more, perhaps, than a way of imagining and dramatising man's dignity. It is true that this way may express the essence of what man's dignity actually is. In losing it, man might gain peace at the price of his soul. (qtd. in Richtarik 1995: 217)

O'Brien esteems the humanism embodied by Antigone but fears its repercussions. As Fiona Macintosh argues, "Antigone, according to O'Brien, is dangerous, yet a source of human 'dignity', the elimination of which may lead to perdition" (2011: 194). Antigone's rebellion is a tricky matter: simultaneously a humane virtue and a hazardous trait. O'Brien's lecture purposefully reaches no firm conclusions, with O'Brien tacitly occupying a middle position between Antigone and Creon. Yet this sought ambiguity would be undermined quickly. A few days later, O'Brien's lecture was published in *the Listener*. In there, O'Brien adds a sentence that he had not dared to spell out in front of the student body: "Without Antigone, we could attain a quieter, more realistic world. The Creons might respect one another's spheres of influence if the instability of idealism were to cease to present, inside their own dominions, a threat to law and order" (qtd. in Paulin 1984: 27). This is a way off from O'Brien's initial hesitation. The invocation of Creon in plural cannot but remind one of the respective seats of power in Stormont, Westminster, and Dublin. Within this scheme, the suggested eradication of Antigone ensures that the delicate balance

between these three poles will not be disrupted. Also, this extra sentence cannot but be read as an indirect way of condemning the Northern Irish Civil Rights movement as incongruous and illegitimate.

With certain modifications and omissions, O'Brien's lecture was also reprinted in his influential book *States of Ireland* (1972). In short, O'Brien's book

> provided a compelling narrative that defended the Irish state, accepted partition, and criticised the irredentist aims of the Provisional IRA and other Irish republicans. *The States of Ireland* argument is a classic articulation of what can now be seen as an ideological counter-insurgency reading of how terror is sustained in sympathetic ideological waters. O'Brien's argument was that wider Irish nationalist and in particular republican cultures were a common cultural and ideological ground. (O'Callaghan 2018: 224)

Again, using *Antigone* as a political analogy, O'Brien points to the tumultuous aftermath of the Derry Civil Rights march, suggesting that all forms of protest, even if fundamentally peaceful, attract violence and should therefore be banned:

> Antigone's action was one of non-violent civil disobedience,[9] the breaking of a law which she considered to be contrary to a higher law. The consequences of her non-violent action emerge in acts of violence: Antigone's own violent death; Haemon's turning of his sword first against his father Creon and then fatally against himself; the suicide of Eurydice, Creon's wife and Haemon's mother. A stiff price for that handful of dust on Polyneices. Nor it is possible to put out all the blame on Creon. Certainly his decision to forbid the burial of Polyneices was rash, but it was also rash to disobey his decision… It was Antigone's free decision, and that alone, which precipitated the tragedy. Creon's responsibility was the more remote one of having placed this tragic power in the hands of a headstrong child of Oedipus. (1972: 151)

O'Brien bluntly declares that it was mainly Antigone's fault, as she drew sword first. Creon's accountability comes secondary, since he is reacting to a previous offence. Still, this is a dangerous mindset. Applying the same logic to the Derry march, the excessive use of police violence against the Civil Rights protesters gets disturbingly justified, only because the march had been declared prohibited moments before its start.[10] Also, O'Brien's overtly cynical remark about

[9] O'Brien definition of Antigone's actions as "'non-violent civil disobedience' [echoes] the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., especially Martin Luther King's doctrine of passive resistance and his argument that civil laws are just or unjust when viewed in the light of a divine of higher law" (Roche 1988: 222). Using such emotionally charged terminology, O'Brien's disapproval of Antigone is altogether more distressing.

[10] Considering also that *States of Ireland* was published a few months after Bloody Sunday, with fourteen civilian protesters being shot dead by British paratroopers, one is appalled by this way of thinking.

"that handful of dust on Polyneices" referring to Antigone's burial of her brother does not sit well with the ritualised burial practices, so much revered in Ireland.[11]

Additionally, there is another historical reason to regard Polyneices' lack of burial as not a trivial matter that created more problems than it solved. One remembers 'the Disappeared', a "group of individuals from the North who were abducted and taken to the South to be murdered. Their exact whereabouts – that is, for the few whose remains have since been found – were often only uncovered decades after their murder, during which time these individuals laid without burial or commemoration" (Chou 2010: 9). In most of those cases, it is believed that the IRA was involved. The organization considered the victims to be informers and by forcibly disappearing them ensured that secret information would not be shared with the enemy. This phenomenon regularly took place in the first decade of the Troubles. Interestingly, in *Seize the Fire*, Paulin makes Hephaestus address Prometheus – chained in an abandoned cliff by Zeus – in a way that evokes 'the Disappeared':

> It breaks my heart
> to leave you in this abattoir –
> a dump for rebels
> and *the disappeared*. (*SF*: 3; italics mine)

Paulin acknowledges the spectre of 'the Disappeared' haunting the Irish mind, as a form of collective trauma. So, it is fair to say that, for a combination of cultural and historical reasons, the burial of Polyneices by Antigone becomes of importance to the Irish consciousness, and surely much more so than O'Brien would initially like to believe.

Still, to fully comprehend O'Brien's ensuing dislike of Antigone, one must place it in the right historical context. The four years separating his original lecture at Queen's University from the publication of *States of Ireland* brought with them the unfolding of the Troubles. Now, the Derry march is no longer seen as a single unfortunate event, but as the starting point of an ongoing stream of violence tantalizing the North. Understandably, O'Brien's reading of *Antigone* is also subject to change.[12] O'Brien had already given up his middle position, to come closer to Creon. In

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[11] In her pioneering work about death practices in Ancient Greece and Ireland, Fiona Macintosh writes: "It is, then, both on account of the continuing public nature of death in Ireland and the persistence of residual beliefs and rituals surrounding death, that death in Ireland is so markedly different from commonly held conceptions of 'modern' death. Furthermore, it is the existence until fairly recently of highly elaborate rituals surrounding death that makes it possible to parallel, and indeed sometimes match, the death rituals in ancient Greece" (1994: 31). Taking this into account, O'Brien's bitter remark about Antigone throwing dust on Polyneices's corpse appears even more misplaced.

[12] Nathan Wallace presents a list of major political events that took place in Northern Ireland between 1972 - the year O'Brien published *States of Ireland* - and *The Riot Act's* premiere in 1984, which also influenced

the end though, he gets intrigued by another character of Sophocles' play, Antigone's sister Ismene:

> The disabilities of Catholics in Northern Ireland are real, but not overwhelmingly oppressive: is their removal really worth attaining at the risk of precipitating riots, explosions, pogroms, murder? Thus Ismene… Antigone is very fine on the stage, or in retrospect or a long way off, or even in real life for a single, splendid epiphany. But after four years of Antigone and her under-studies and all those funerals… you begin to feel that Ismene's common sense and feeling for the living may make the more needful, if less spectacular element in 'human dignity'. (*Ibid*. 152-3)

Ultimately, O'Brien sides with Ismene, who in Sophocles' tragedy refuses to partake in Antigone's plan to bury Polyneices, maintaining an impassive stance. O'Brien praises Ismene for this, arguing that it is her less charismatic demeanour that could eventually save "man's dignity", and not Antigone's erratic behaviour, as he first had mused. Correlating Antigone with the outburst of violence in Northern Ireland, O'Brien sees in Antigone's reluctant sister an ideological ally. Ismene sees the injustice imposed on Polyneices but refuses to act fearing the possible repercussions – "I ask for pardon to those buried under me; since I am constrained, I will obey those in power. It is silly to try to act differently" (*ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν αἰτοῦσα τοὺς ὑπὸ χθονὸς ξύγγνοιαν ἴσχειν, ὡς βιάζομαι τάδε, τοῖς ἐν τέλει βεβῶσι πείσομαι: τὸ γὰρ περισσὰ πράσσειν οὐκ ἔχει νοῦν οὐδένα.*) (*Ant.* 65-8). Similarly, O'Brien declares that Catholic subjugation in Northern Ireland is real but not worthy of intervention, as this would bring on bigger troubles.[13]

Expectedly, Tom Paulin was in complete disagreement with O'Brien's conclusion. Paulin felt that O'Brien was deliberately bending the meaning of the Sophoclean play to make it fit his own political ends. Therefore, he decided to take up action. His first response came in essay form. On 14 November 1980 O'Brien published in the *Times Literary Supplement* a biting critique of O'Brien's political profile entitled 'The Making of a Loyalist'; the essay was reprinted four years

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Antigone's reception: "Just as the situation, and, therefore, also the applicability of the Antigone analogy, had developed significantly between the publication of O'Brien's article in 1968 and 1972, huge changes had, of course, also taken place between 1972 and 1984. In 1976, for instance, the British government revoked republican and loyalist paramilitary prisoners' special-category status. Over the next several years, this led to various kinds of protests - mainly by republicans - from 'blanket protests' and 'dirt protests' to, most horrifyingly, the IRA hunger strikes of 1981. Despite the international pressures brought upon Margaret Thatcher's government to negotiate with the republican leadership inside the prison, the Prime Minister infamously held fast. It would, therefore, be her image as the 'Iron Lady', steadfastly refusing the symbolic demands of republican prisoners at Long Kesh, that became the inevitable modern analogy for Creon" (2015: 75-6).

[13] In *The Riot Act*, the Chorus makes a comment about Polyneices that "His story was a thin wee grievance that went on for ages" (*RA*: 15). Such remark is reminiscent of O'Brien's depreciation of the problems faced by the Catholic population in the North.

later in Paulin's collective volume *Ireland & the English Crisis* (1984). As the essay's title suggests, Paulin narrates the gradual transformation of O'Brien into a Unionist. Paulin offers a psychological reading of O'Brien's persona supported by biographical information like O'Brien's peculiar upbringing:

> Francis Cruise O'Brien ensured that his son received a Protestant education, and this tempered his inherited Catholic allegiances. In O'Brien's self-portrait we can see how the two traditions balance each other and allow that rare figure, the 'objective' historian to emerge. This transcendental historian is able to voice and confirm Protestant fears of domination by a Catholic state. (Paulin 1984: 24)

Paulin moves on to argue that O'Brien's self-fabricated 'objectivity' is just a façade, thus undermining his stature "as the objective historian, the *engagé* intellectual who is also disengaged by virtue of his superior wisdom" (*Ibid*. 26). In truth, Paulin maintains, O'Brien is biased and picks sides according to his political beliefs. Although he may have been successful in hiding it so far, O'Brien's supposed lack of objectivity is finally evident in his profound dislike of Antigone: "Here Antigone (i.e. Bernadette Devlin[14] and the Civil Rights movement) becomes responsible for 'all those funerals'. This means that the Unionist state is virtually absolved of all responsibility and Creon's hands appear to be clean" (*Ibid*. 27). Paulin concludes that O'Brien's reading of the tragedy is far from innocent, as he does not treat the two adversaries the same way:

> O'Brien loyalties are to the 'daylight gods', and he sees the political conflict in the play as one of unequal personal responsibilities. Creon, therefore, is both individual and institution, yet he appears to be more an institution, while Antigone, like St Joan, appears as an individual ahead of her supporters. She is 'headstrong' and therefore more responsible because she can supposedly exercise choice. So Creon is rendered almost innocent by his immobile precedence, his simply being there. (*Ibid*. 28)

Paulin is convinced that O'Brien did not invoke the duel between Antigone and Creon to even-handedly describe the political impasse in Northern Ireland, but in a way that serves his political convictions that side with the maintenance of the *status quo* in the North and the preservation of the Northern Irish state.

[14] Bernadette Devlin McAliskey was one of the leading figures of the Civil Rights protests in Northern Ireland. Her young age and impassioned demeanour quickly brought the Antigone impression on her. More information about her will be given in the following sections.

Yet, Paulin is only partially satisfied by his essay response to O'Brien. Unveiling O'Brien's true motives behind the condemnation of Antigone is not enough. The harm O'Brien has done to the female heroine warrants another form of response. Paulin feels that the best way to redeem Antigone is in her natural habitat, the theatre: "O'Brien's target was Irish nationalism, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and the Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement, which he saw as responsible for the violent politics of Northern Ireland. He misinterpreted the play, and in doing a version of it I set out to try and prove him wrong" (2002: 167). This is the very moment when Paulin decides to adapt *Antigone* for the Irish stage.

Starting from the following section, we will delve into *The Riot Act* to examine how Paulin defends Antigone in an attempt to upturn O'Brien's argumentation and restore her reputation in Ireland.

Staging the Language of the Troubles: Paulin's Usage of Hiberno-English

Regardless of whether one opts for O'Brien's or Paulin's interpretation of the tragedy, the very choice of the plot of *Antigone* as a mythic equivalent of the turbulences in Northern Ireland can be hardly questioned. "*Antigone* is a story of a city divided; where a family's feud for power precipitates a conflict so cruel that it pits friend with friend and neighbour against neighbour. In many ways, no better metaphor exists than this for the civil conflict which has marked Northern Ireland's recent past" (Chou 2010: 1). Despite their quarrel, none of the two Irishmen would find fault with the above remark. Arguably, after O'Brien's lecture, Paulin did not have to demonstrate at length that *Antigone* is a tragedy that possesses topical relevance. "The Creon-Antigone pairing as a metonymic resemblance of the politics of polarization between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland" (Remoundou-Howley 2011: 135) had already been established.

Still, Paulin was faced with another pressing challenge upon preparing *The Riot Act*. Specifically, he had to device a way to transfer the atmosphere of the Troubles to stage by infusing the plotline of *Antigone* with distinguishing Northern Irish markers. He did this by making the tragedy's protagonists speak the language of the conflict:

> Drawing on Richard Jebb's nineteenth-century translation, Paulin pares away the florid Victorian embellishments to arrive at a short verse line, lean, terse, understated. The play is written in a pared, minimal style, conversational yet urgent, whose Anglo-Irish speech and syntax find a home and context for such lexical outcasts as 'screggy', 'sleg', 'pobby'. (Roche 1988: 225)

Paulin invests in the nuances of the Northern Irish vernacular to attribute to *The Riot Act* a sense of local significance and immediacy. Just like any other Field Day Company production, Paulin's play "takes the theme of language and naming as critical to the representation of personal and public identity in Northern Ireland; [he] sees 'Irish' identity to be inextricably bound to the languages of Ireland (Gaelic, English, Irish English), languages defined largely in terms of their innate cultural authority" (Worthen 1995: 24). Therefore, one must examine closely the theatrical text to discern the special type of language that Paulin uses to characterize his protagonists, and, in turn, enhance the action of the play with indisputable Irish referents.

To start with, Paulin sees the replacement of Gaelic with English as a traumatic event for the Irish people, who were compelled to relinquish their mother tongue for the language of the conqueror. This sentiment is conveyed in the theatrical text, where the Chorus declares: "Ever since the day I made this speech – it was in another time and place, and in a different language too – the grief I was speaking of then has grown and multiplied. It's got more and more" (*RA*: 35). This confession is ingrained in the collective experience of being Irish. As Maria-Elena Doyle explicates:

"Paulin's chorus laments its own sad history, one shaped, even defined, by a change in language, and the fact that the accumulation of sorrows is connected to the loss of a language gives the play perhaps its closest identification with the situation in Ireland" (2000: 179). The replacement of Gaelic with English as the main language in Ireland translates into a fundamental issue that the Irish faced, namely the need to domesticate and make their own a language that has been forced upon them. Arguably, this circumstance contributed decisively to the development of the Hiberno-English dialect.

In *The Riot Act*, Paulin aims to emphasize this peculiarity and bring to the fore certain English words that possess a distinct Irish nuance. For instance, early in the play, Ismene refuses Antigone's proposal to bury Polyneices by saying: "You are talking *wild* | it's Creon's order" (*RA*: 11; italics mine). Here, a small but crucial deviation from the ancient text occurs. In the corresponding passage from the Sophoclean tragedy, Ismene accuses Antigone as reckless for speaking against Creon (*ὦ σχετλία, Κρέοντος ἀντειρηκότος;*) (*Ant.* 48). The adjective *σχέτλιος* can also mean 'unflinching' or 'steadfast', but mainly in a bad sense. In *The Riot Act*, Paulin prefers to sketch Antigone as 'wild'. This is an adjective that has a distinct meaning in Ireland. Opposed to the negative connotations of 'reckless' or 'cruel' that the Greek word *σχέτλιος* denotes, 'wild' has a positive bearing in the Irish imagination.[15] Particularly, "The wildness of Paulin's Antigone is not a synonym for anarchic action or a threat to civic order as Creon would like to believe. On the contrary… it is a form of loyalty to her kin, and the extended family; a kind of tribal alliance with its own instinctive rules and unwritten laws" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2023: 443). Therefore, from the outset of *The Riot Act*, Paulin makes a powerful statement about Antigone's character: to be 'wild' means to be Irish.

To give a characteristic example of the Irish usage of 'wild', W. B. Yeats's 'On a Political Prisoner' is a poem that refers to Constance Gore-Booth. During the Easter Rising, Gore-Booth was incarcerated for her participation in the rebellion. In the poem written about the female revolutionary, Yeats commemorates:

> When long ago I saw her ride
> Under Ben Bulben to the meet,
> The beauty of her country-side
> With all youth's lonely *wildness* stirred,
> She seemed to have grown clean and sweet
> Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird. (1996: 80; italics mine)

[15] In his translation from ancient Greek, Jebb translates *σχετλία* as 'over-bold'. Still, this does not match the semantic richness of Paulin's 'wild'.

Yeats's portrayal of Gore-Booth could also fit Antigone. In fact, a resemblance between the two is established: both women are political prisoners in the prime of their youth. Also, they both get punished by a higher authority as a result of their rebellious behaviour. Finally, both of them are convinced for the righteousness of their struggle, showing unwillingness to compromise. All these features are a result of the 'wildness' that motivates them. Yet, to understand better this attribute, one should refrain from the common definition of the word and check instead how it is understood in Ireland:

> This wildness is not a barbarism to be set over against civilisation since the terms of these polarities have been too long co-opted by the British, casting themselves in the light of the bearers of civilisation, order, rule, and moderation, and the Irish as the unkempt barbarians, who will not be tamed but Caliban-like insist on wallowing in the mud. The 'wildness' may be transvalued as exuberance, primitive earthiness, an integrity of body and soul that resists social integration or confinement within limits. (Roche 1988: 226)

Paulin is aware of the above distinction. The 'wildness' of his Antigone is the moral compass by which she judges how she should act. Within this context, the burial of Polyneices comes as non-negotiable, notwithstanding the illegality of such 'wild' act. This view gets reinforced by the following report that the Guard gives to Creon upon finding the body of Polyneices buried: "He wasn't the least bit ripped nor torn. It was *wild*, though" (*RA*: 20; italics mine). Thus, Antigone's transgression is inseparably bound to her innate 'wildness'. It is this attribute that makes her disregard death, echoing the Republican martyrs. As the Chorus comments about Antigone's fearless demeanour: "It's in her blood: | she won't surrender" (*Ibid*. 27). And again, when Antigone sings her own dirge before meeting death, the Chorus exclaims: "*Wild* as ever | in her speech she is" (*Ibid*. 47; italics mine). In fact, the same could apply to Constance Gore-Booth and the rest of the Easter Rising conspirators, about whom Yeats famously wonders in 'Easter, 1916': "And what if excess of love | *Bewildered* them till they died?" (1996: 180; italics mine). Once more, Irish history and Greek myth seem to correspond; similar to the Easter rebels, it is Antigone's love for her brother Polyneices that 'bewildered' her and led her to death.

The Riot Act abounds in examples like this. The whole text is permeated with allusions to recent events in Irish history and its leading actors. Naturally, the Troubles are placed in the foreground. The incessant violence of this period as well as the lack of a possible way out of it are recorded in the following words of Tiresias to Creon:

> Now so much blood's been split
> there's none can call a halt
> to those thrawn and jaggy hates

deep-rooted in your state. (*RA*: 53-54)

Some hints to this period like the above are overly explicit, while others may escape the untrained eye/ear. In any case, most of these associations do not arise from extratextual elements, such as the theatrical setting and the actors' clothing, but rather, they are accomplished through language alone:

> *The Riot Act* sticks very closely to the structure of the original play, and the first production's modern costumes and draperied set hinted at, but did not clearly delineate, particular national affiliations. Visually, the play seemed to strive for profound abstraction with its precise choreography, its dark curtains and starkly lit stage, but by manipulating the way the characters sounded, Paulin was able to suggest a number of connections that would be familiar parts of the cultural vocabulary of a local audience. (Doyle 2000: 178)

As a result, to trace Paulin's topical echoes in *The Riot Act*, one must not only focus on *what* is said, but also *how* this is said. Paulin persistently reproduces on stage the Ulster demotic, the language and vocabulary of the conflict. It is with the strategic introduction of this peculiar Hiberno-English idiom that the Antigonean thematics acquire topical resonance and come to symbolize the sectarian division in Northern Ireland. Generally, Paulin does not digress too much from the plotline of the Sophoclean tragedy, remaining faithful to the sequence of events as they unfold in the original text.[16] As Marianne McDonald notes:

> Paulin has pared down Sophocles' *Antigone* from 1353 lines to 1256… In Paulin's play the Northern accents shape the classical text, and particular joins universal. The theme is justice: who has power over whom? Is it the state that prevails? Do one's family and friends take precedence? Should the Irish accept British rule, or are there roots that are stronger in the family and the soil that must be protected? Does one sell one's soul to save one's life? (1996: 96)

This serves as a firm attestation that all references to Northern Ireland result from the type of language that Paulin uses in *The Riot Act*.

By the same token, the political affiliation of each character in the play is revealed by their manner of speaking. It is "quite easy to see Creon as a Unionist intransigent and Antigone as a republican martyr, one asserting the law of the state as a universal, the other a more fundamental

[16] The main alternation that Paulin has made in *The Riot Act* is that he reduced the size of the choric passages: "I used the Ulster vernacular as far as I could, and slashed away at the choruses to make the play run for fifty minutes and no more" (Paulin 2002: 167).

natural law as superior to any created by humans" (Deane 2002: 154). The two antagonists address one another in a way that is reminiscent of how the two opposing camps fight each other in Northern Ireland. In fact, each of the two characters has its real-life counterpart: both Antigone and Creon come to embody some prominent figures of the Troubles like Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and Ian Paisley respectively. Certain keywords they utter and quirks they have decidedly attests to this. Yet, before moving to specific examples, it is interesting to take a closer look at Paulin's view on the overall status of Hiberno-English. This way, we will better grasp the political effects behind Paulin's choice to theatrically stage the language of the Troubles.

In an essay devoted to the current standing of Hiberno-English in the English-speaking world, Paulin laments the fact that this dialect has not been properly recorded:

> Although there are scholarly studies of 'Hiberno English' and 'Ulster English', the language appears at the present moment to be in a state of near anarchy. Spoken Irish English exists in a number of provincial and local forms, but because no scholar has as yet compiled a *Dictionary of Irish English* many words are literally homeless.[17] They live in the careless richness of speech, but they rarely appear in print. When they do, many readers are unable to understand them and have no dictionary where they can discover their meaning. The language therefore lives freely and spontaneously as speech, but it lacks any constitutional existence and so is impoverished as a literary medium. It is a language without a lexicon, a language without form… Until recently, few Irish writers appear to have felt frustrated by the absence of a dictionary which might define those words which are in common usage in Ireland, but which do not appear in the OED. This is possibly because most writers have instinctively moulded their language to the expectations of the larger audience outside Ireland. The result is a language which lives a type of romantic, unfettered existence - no dictionary accommodates it, no academy regulates it, no common legislative body speaks it, and no national newspaper guards it. Thus the writer who professes this language must either explain dialect words tediously in a glossary or restrict his audience at each particular 'dialectical' moment… One of the results of this enormous cultural impoverishment is a living, but fragmented speech, untold numbers of homeless words, and an uncertain or a derelict prose. (1985b: 11, 15, 17)

Paulin is not in a position to solve the basic problem of Hiberno-English as he understands it, due to the absence of an authoritative lexicon. Yet, in *The Riot Act* he attempts what other Northern Irish have consistently failed to do, namely to expose their audience to the full potential of Hiberno-English. Hence, instead of handling the dialect with hesitation or a constant need of clarification as if it is a taboo, "Paulin aims to legitimate Irish English as a recognized form of

[17] A dictionary of Hiberno-English would finally be published in 1998 by T. P. Dollan.

English, and as a literary, aesthetic, and political medium" (Worthen 1995: 24). To do so, Paulin uses the dialect uncompromisingly, as this is spoken every day in the North:

> The conversational speech tone in Anglo-Irish and Ulster-Scots, the minimalist syntactical and verbal approach, the deliberate use of colloquial words, and the understated expressions of tragic pathos such as "aye, it's fixed" (35), " Ismene, love" (9), "aye, dust on the crop" (19), "o' the whole pack o 'ye" (22), "that yap like this one" (27), "hard-nosed bitch" (36), "born eejit" (37), all go hand in hand with Paulin's belief in the power of spoken, familiar language. In the context of modernizing the classical text for the Irish audience, the surrendering to the Northern Irish vernacular seems fitting for a poet whose strong views on language have shaped his disavowal of an elite verbosity in favour of the unpretentious, natural, recognizable rhythms of everyday *langue*. (Remoundou-Howley 2011: 148)

The Ulster vernacular pervades *The Riot Act* and serves as the main communication currency between all characters in the play. In doing so, Paulin pioneers in the exposition of a cultural vocabulary that is admittedly shared by everyone in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their religion or where they stand politically. Consequently, the original audience of *The Riot Act* comprised of both Nationalists and Unionists, witnesses a version of *Antigone* the language of which sounds eerily familiar. The Greek ancestry of the play gets momentarily obscured, as Antigone, Creon, and the rest of the characters re-enact on stage the severe climate of the sectarian divide in the North.

In the following section we will investigate further how the distinct language that Paulin uses to depict his characters leaves no room for doubt as to who are the two figures standing behind the contest of Antigone with Creon.

Ian Paisley & Bernadette Devlin McAliskey: The Standard-Bearers of the Conflict

Throughout *The Riot Act*, Paulin inserts a coded phraseology that obliquely points to the Troubles and their protagonists. A characteristic example is located in the opening dialogue between Antigone and Ismene. In their verbal exchange, Antigone warns her sister about the punishment that awaits anyone who breaks Creon's edict. The way that Antigone chooses to share this information is quite intriguing, as she uses a phrase that is all too intimate to a Northern Irish audience:

> And you and me both,
> we're expected to take this!
> *We must bend the knee*
> Or they'll stone us in the street. (*RA*: 10; italics mine)

The message here is clear: any form of disobedience to Creon's rule will lead to death. Antigone and Ismene will either show submission to Creon or they will be fatally battered. On the surface, Paulin seems to be following Jebb's translation of the corresponding Sophoclean passage a little loosely, yet conveying the same meaning about Creon's edict: "nor counts the matter light, but, who disobeys in aught, his doom is death by stoning before the folk" (1897: 7) (*καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμ᾽ ἄγειν οὐχ ὡς παρ᾽ οὐδέν, ἀλλ᾽ ὃς ἂν τούτων τι δρᾷ, φόνον προκεῖσθαι δημόλευστον ἐν πόλει.*) (*Ant*. 34-6).

Upon a second reading, however, an infamous slogan of the Troubles crops up. It is the third line of the excerpt that carries a special weight. One remembers the Reverend Ian Paisley, the belligerent loyalist leader and Protestant zealot, who throughout the Troubles pushed for an ultra-hardline Unionist agenda. Paisley was the founder and head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the chief loyalist organization in Northern Ireland. Paisley's political trajectory is so conflated with the Troubles that he has been fancifully portrayed "as much the prisoner as the master of the sectarian demon" (Lee: 1989: 428). Seen by his enemies as an agitator responsible for much of the violence against the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, Paisley maintained that he and his people were actually those under assault. Paisley was a vocal opponent of any power-sharing concessions with the Catholics of Northern Ireland. Having also founded his own church, the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, Paisley was combining religious sermon with political propaganda to put forward his anti-Catholic sentiments. A vociferous personality, Paisley was "bestriding the political landscape of Northern Ireland with the Bible in one hand and both eyes on the ballot box" (Coogan 1996: 45). In all of his public addresses, a notorious battle cry repeatedly came out of his mouth: "No surrender. We will never bend the knee". This phrase came to become synonymous with Paisleyan politics. It not only summarizes the combative demeanour

of the Ulster firebrand, but also sets the tone for the hostility towards the Catholic enemy that Paisley expects all Ulster Unionists to exhibit.

As shown above, Paulin incorporates Paisley's phrase within the narrative of *The Riot Act*, but with a twist. Antigone and Ismene "must bend the knee" to Creon. This inversion is certainly ironic. Antigone must do what Paisley vehemently refuses to do. This way, Paulin wants to underline Creon's, and by extension Paisley's, thirst for domination. Paisley's refusal to "bend the knee" ultimately translates to the aspiration he has that his enemies submit to him. By appropriating the "bend the knee" imagery, Paulin not only establishes a connection between the forceful Unionist spokesman and Creon, but also provides a commentary about the basic ideological teachings of Paisleyism: by not bending the knee, the DUP demagogue assumes that his Catholic opponents will bend it themselves first. This way, Paulin indirectly articulates that Paisley's stance is not really defensive as he purports, but behind his "no surrender" disposition, lies a threatening tactician.

The notion that Paisley is behind Creon's mask is further corroborated by the following announcement made by the Chorus moments before Creon enters the stage:

> Now watch *the big man*
> this bran-new morning:
> our new King Creon's
> wanting some wise words
> from us old ones. (*RA*: 15; italics mine)

"The big man" is no other than Paisley himself, who, because of his tall and sturdy appearance, was known by this nickname among friends and foes. Upon hearing this epithet, the audience at the premiere of *The Riot Act* has no doubts as to who is the person that Creon represents. The timing is not accidental: Paulin wants from the very beginning of his play to make sure that everyone sees Creon and imagines Paisley. Having defined pretty much all aspects of public life in Ulster, "the big man" prepares now to dominate the Northern Irish theatrical stage.

Before presenting Creon's opening speech, it is worthwhile to briefly digress and take a look at an essay that Paulin wrote about Ian Paisley in 1982. Entitled 'Paisley's Progress', Paulin traces some of the key moments in the Ulsterman's political career and makes certain observations about how carefully orchestrated his public persona is: "Paisley's particular kind of puritan egotism is voracious in its subjectivity, and for all its insistence on sincerity is in practice highly theatrical. He is a compulsive role-player and is fond of dressing up in other people's personalities" (Paulin 1996: 32). Paulin stresses that Paisley's attributes as an orator possess theatrical underpinnings. His populist allure is performance-based. The same goes for his

chameleon-like temperament: Paisley assumes different roles according to the expectations of the audience that he has in front of him. Instead of consistently speaking his mind, Paisley is predominantly preoccupied to deliver what the people want to hear.

The critique and psychological reading that Paulin offers of Paisley influences on a great extent the impending portrayal of Creon in *The Riot Act*.[18] Like his real-life counterpart, Paulin's Creon uses a different type of language, depending on the occasion before him. To quote Paulin's words: "I imagined Creon to be a kind of puritan gangster, a megalomaniac who spoke alternately in an English public school voice and a deep menacing Ulster growl" (2002: 167). This is a description that could also fit Paisley, a man with acumen in communication matters but also a master of disguise. Similarly, it is one Creon publicly addressing the masses to appease them or gather them to his side, and a totally different version of him standing behind the curtains and conversing with those he considers his inferiors. In the first occasion Creon comes across as considerate and reliable, whereas in the second he reveals his manipulative and abusive side.

Creon's first appearance on stage carries with it comical undertones. One must read between the lines to perceive Paulin's ridiculing of Creon. The whole setting is a bit absurd: a somewhat fatigued Creon addresses the crowd as if in a press conference, using a subtly condescending rhetoric to establish his position as king of Thebes and inform the citizens about his edict regarding Polyneices' body.[19] The overall feeling produced from his speech is that Creon just pretends to respect the institutions that he supposedly represents. He wants to transmit the impression that everything is back to normal and ensure his people that safety prevails in Thebes. In reality, however, Creon is boorish and inconsiderate of others; he just wants to be done with his speech quickly, seeing the interaction with his subjects as an unpleasant inconvenience instead of a respectful obligation. As Richard Jones observes: "Creon's lengthy opening speech, with its aura of a press conference, is spoken completely in prose, but in a special kind of prose: evasive, pompous, official: the language of power" (1997: 236). Thus, listening to Creon, the audience senses immediately the despotic traits of his character.

To provide a condensed version of Creon's speech:

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[18] Before *The Riot Act*, Paulin wrote a poem inspired by the Theban king entitled 'Under Creon', which is included in his poetry collection *Liberty Tree* (1983). In the poem Creon "represents the Ulster Unionist establishment, while the poet implicitly becomes the voice of Antigone in memorializing forgotten heroes of radical Presbyterianism" (Torrance 2021: 278). Specifically, the poem sheds light on Paulin's political ideology and his views on a united Irish state. As Arkins adds: "'Under Creon' establishes that [Paulin's] preferred state, though green, would have to find room for the genuine Dissenters in Northern Ireland in the late eighteenth century such as Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope, and Joseph Biggar" (2010: 39).

[19] Creon's public voice strikes one critic as "a parody of a Northern Ireland Office political functionary appealing for public support" (O'Toole 1984), whereas Mitchel Harris becomes more specific by arguing that Creon's entry echoes "the opening remarks of Northern Ireland's incoming Secretary of State, Douglas Hurd, in the summer of 1984" (qtd. in Roche 1988: 224).

> Mr. Chairman, loyal citizens of Thebes, these recent months have indeed been a most distressing time for us all. It therefore gives me great pleasure to report that public confidence and order are now fully restored, and, if I may, I would further like to take this opportunity of thanking each and every one of you for your steadfastness and your most exceptional loyalty… For purely technical and legal reasons – kinship to the dead and so on – the office of king therefore devolves upon me… For my own part, I have always held that one of the soundest maxims of good government is: *always listen to the very best advice*. And in the coming months I shall be doing a very great deal of listening, sounding opinions and so forth… However, let me say this, and say it plainly right at the very outset, that if ever any man here should find himself faced with a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friends, then he must swiftly place that friend in the hands of the authorities…[20] If I might further add – and I know that Zeus will support me here – that if ever I should see this country heading for disaster I would be quite incapable of standing idly by and saying nothing…[21] These, in brief, are the principles by which I intend to govern this city… And it follows naturally from those same principles that I should wish to amplify the statement which was issued in my name yesterday evening. 'Eteocles, who died fighting for his city, shall be given a full state funeral' – reversed arms, carriage and so on – 'whilst Polynices shall be deemed guilty of treason and refused all burial'… Thank you all for coming, and any questions just now? We have one minute. (*RA*: 15-7)

Paulin modernizes Creon by making him speak like contemporary politicians do in front of television cameras. This way, it is easier for the audience of *The Riot Act* to identify as the addressee of Creon's speech: the "loyal citizens of Thebes" is indeed them. Immediately, a strong feeling spreads that Creon is untrustworthy. For instance, the promise that Creon will be doing "a great deal of listening" is straightaway undermined by the succeeding remark that "we have one minute" only for questions. Clues like this show that Creon is double-faced and deceitful, reminding the play's spectators about their prevalent distrustfulness towards Northern Irish politicians.

Creon, like every gifted orator, can speak in various tones and dialects. In his first address, he speaks to all of Thebes (or Northern Ireland) using a clinical language akin to a bureaucratic official from Westminster. In his private dealings, on the other hands, he switches to a vulgar lingo.

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[20] Creon's statement about betrayal is an ironic reversal of E. M. Foster's famous saying that "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country".

[21] Here Creon refers to a well-known phrase uttered during the Troubles, also used by Seamus Heaney as the title of one of his poem, 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'. The poem is about the culture of silence that the Troubles brought in the North and the prevailing life-threatening dangers that exist if one speaks freely their mind.

His foul-mouthed charge to the Guard to go fetch the person who put dust on Polyneices's body is characteristic of this:

> go you, dead quick,
> and find who done it,
> else I'll tear the skin
> off o'the whole pack o'ye
> and roast you real slow. (*Ibid*. 22)

Compared to his earlier composure when addressing the public, in his private moments Creon is shockingly rude and impatient. An indicative example is when Creon commands that Antigone is presented to him: "Bring out the dirty bitch | and let's be rid of her" (*Ibid*. 42).[22] Evidently, Creon exerts his dominance by being cruel to those serving him. The way he belittles the Guard is another indicator of the power games that Creon thrives at playing:

> My good man,
> pray tell me simply
> what's on your tiny mind. (*Ibid*. 19)
> …
> You never thought!
> Don't strain yourself,
> a philosopher-guard[23]
> would make us all weep. (*Ibid*. 23)

Creon's brazen disregard of others is not only limited to his subordinates, but also extends to his family members. For instance, Creon does not back down when his son Haemon tries to convince him to release Antigone. Actually, he is furious that Haemon decided "To turn on me like this | out here in public!" (*Ibid*. 40). As the caricature of a modern politician, Creon is obsessed with

[22] Isabelle Torrance makes an interesting case for Creon's repeated cursing of Antigone as "dirty", and how this relates to autochthonous Irishness and an array of dark moments in Irish history: "Antigone's association with the earth, through her act of covering her brother's body, along with her confinement to a rural landscape, speak to prejudices against a rural ethnic Irish identity. At the same time, the demeaning way in which Creon uses the language of dirt to degrade Antigone evokes the 1980 'dirty protests' of female political prisoners in Armagh Women's Prison, who alleged mistreatment by male prison officers. Antigone is to be imprisoned in a dirty cave and left to die of starvation once the food she has been given runs out. Death by starvation once again echoes contemporary Northern Irish experiences not long after ten political prisoners had died on hunger strike in 1981" (2020: 329).

[23] This is an ironic reference to the Platonic notion of the Philosopher-King, as elaborated in the *Republic*. Plato's ideal ruler had to combine extraordinary political skills with deep philosophical training, attributes that Creon mockingly implies that the Guard does not have.

maintaining his public image, fearing any developments that might spoil it. Also, when Haemon blames him that as a leader "You never listened" (*Ibid*. 39), Creon sarcastically replies "Or split my rule, then, | with some king else?" (*Ibid*.). Apart from its obvious absolutist overtones, Creon's retort leaves off a tempting topical resonance, as it reminds one of the Northern Irish Protestant leadership persistently refusing to participate in governance alongside the Catholic minority. Similarly, when Creon screams to Haemon "Obey your father, | that's only nature" (*Ibid*. 36), one understands that Paulin here makes a wider claim about the overwhelming ubiquitousness of patriarchy in politics and all other aspects of life.

Unsurprisingly, Creon is also casually misogynistic. In the beginning, he underestimates Antigone's determination on the basis of her femininity. Creon does not recognize Antigone as an equal opponent, refusing to take her seriously. Characteristic is the following statement he makes about the supposed mental weakness of women compared to men:

> They're easy broken
> that yap like this one.
> If she were a man, now,
> She'd maybe stick. (*Ibid*. 27)

When Creon sees that Antigone is not broken down nor will have a change of heart, he switches to a ludicrous rhetoric of 'man *versus* woman': "You'd take a woman's side?" (*Ibid*. 40), Creon asks Haemon with genuine wonder, only to exclaim with pure disgust a moment later: "He's given in – and to a *woman*!" (*Ibid*. 41). Creon unashamedly espouses male superiority, unable to accept that a woman can stand her own ground, let alone partake in decision making: "As long as I draw breath | I'll not be bested by a woman." (*Ibid*. 30), he chillingly vows. For him, Antigone's transgression comes to signify something bigger that the act of burial itself; it translates to a threat of the whole male order.

Finally, Creon is also disrespectful with the elders. When the wise seer Tiresias comes to warn him that executing Antigone will lead to his destruction, Creon scorns him by referring to his old age and his allegedly deteriorating mental capabilities:

> Old man, old shaman,
> Just spit it out –
> what bribe d' you take? (*Ibid*. 51)
> …
> No fool like an old fool. (*Ibid*. 52)

Despite Creon's outward self-assurance, he harbours deep-seated insecurities. He perceives enemies everywhere, particularly within his inner circle, where everyone is seen as a potential threat to his rule. This way, Creon persistently confuses good-natured criticism with treachery. The fact that he is convinced that Tiresias must have been bribed to advise him to change his decree, confirms this. Creon has a similar reaction upon hearing the Guard recounting the story of how he found the body of Polyneices buried: "You were bought, boy, | and you'll pay the price" (*Ibid*. 22). In Creon's worldview, everything has a price. "Money, brother - | dirty, dirty money - | might lead them by the nose." (*Ibid*. 18), is a phrase that sums up the lack of faith that Creon has in his advisers and humans in general.

To conclude with Creon, Anthony Roche spells out Creon's double-layered identification with Northern Ireland that Paulin sought to establish in *The Riot Act*:

> Creon's speech, therefore, is not only that of the practiced public official from 'the mainland' but also of someone from Ulster, Unionist anxious to reassure those he represents by sounding the code words of the tribe, 'law', 'order' and 'loyalty'. Creon's speech progressively mutates into distinctively Ulster, rather than Oxbridge, tones and dialect, as in his reference to Ismene: 'And this one here - | the sneaky, sleaked one - | she lived in my house too'". (1988: 224)

Repeatedly switching from 'official' English to the local Ulster dialect, Creon's hybrid verbal presence is representative of Northern Ireland's status as a *locus* of contested powers and cultures. Likewise, Creon's aberrant behaviour and double standard personality blatantly reflects the *status quo* in Northern Ireland, with the unequal share of power between the Protestant majority and Catholic minority. Paulin masterfully depicts a leader who is afraid that his rule rests on feeble grounds and knows that the only way to political survival is to perpetuate the systemic injustice cultivated by his governorship.

Creon's prevalent identification with Ian Paisley, urges one to think that Antigone's portrayal in *The Riot Act* will generate analogous comparisons. If Creon embodies the Northern Irish establishment, Antigone must personify the fervent opposition to it. Hence, Paulin is expected to match Antigone with a figure that fulfilled this defiant role during the Troubles. As mentioned before, this person is Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, the female Civil Rights activist and youngest MP in the history of the British parliament since William Pitt the Younger. As will be shown, the similarities between Devlin and Antigone are too many to ignore. Devlin's unflagging determination and tenacious personality cannot but remind one of Antigone. Once again, Paulin manages to convey the sensation that behind the mask of his Greek protagonists, a familiar Irish person is to be found.

Being a Northern Catholic, Bernadette Devlin knew first-hand the subordination suffered by the members of her community.[24] A woman of action like Antigone, Devlin took matters into her hands and fought back, both in the streets and in the political arena. Furthermore, like Antigone, Devlin did not bow to any authority until she got imprisoned for her unruly behaviour. Specifically, Devlin "won a seat in the British parliament for the Mid-Ulster constituency in 1969 at just 21 years of age, and in December that same year, [she got] incarcerated for 'incitement to riot' before being successfully re-elected to her position as MP in 1970" (Torrance 2020: 326).[25] Paulin is observant of this, and accordingly models his Antigone in the likes of a contemporary political prisoner in Northern Ireland. As Torrance notes: "When the Guard delivers the news to Creon that the perpetrator has been apprehended and found to be Antigone, he tells Creon 'you can lock her up now and knock a statement out of her', an allusion to police brutality against political prisoners during the Troubles in Northern Ireland" (*Ibid*. 328). Devlin was on the receiving end of this repulsive reality, making her connection to Antigone even more plausible.

Devlin's radicalism serves as the perfect counterweight to Ian Paisley's intransigence. With this established, Paulin ensures that both rivals in *The Riot Act* carry with them a set of opposing ideals that are encountered in the North: "Paulin envisions Antigone as a Republican rebel and Creon as a Unionist leader of the Thatcherite era, representing two worlds, two mindsets, two laws, two creeds, and two languages colliding" (Remoundou-Howley 2011: 124).[26] Devlin wants to bring change to what Paisley fights with all his heart to preserve. So, as the audience of *The Riot Act* watches Antigone revolting against Creon's rule, they unavoidably call to mind the political opposites of Bernadette Devlin and Ian Paisley.

Bernadette Devlin's parallelism to Antigone has deep roots. Placing Antigone's sudden popularity in Ireland during the 1980's in a wider historical context, Fiona Macintosh provides a convincing explanation as to why Bernadette Devlin was seen by many as a living personification of the Greek heroine:

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[24] It is nevertheless important to note that at their core Devlin's politics were socialist and class-oriented. Devlin believed in working class solidarity between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster, whom she equally saw as the real victims of a constitutionally unfair Northern Irish state.

[25] Devlin's imprisonment inspired another Irish poet, John Montague, to write and dedicate a poem to her, entitled 'A New Siege'. The poem is described as a 'historical meditation' on the sectarian conflict in Ulster and has as a subheading the sentence "Old moulds are broken in the North". Montague recited the poem in front of the prison gates where Devlin was held. 'A New Siege' was later included in Montague's poetry collection *The Rough Field* (1972).

[26] Although not acknowledged by all critics, Thatcher's politics were Creonian at their core. Carmen Szabo characteristically recalls an occasion when Thatcher was "addressing the issue of the miners' strikes, [she] invoked the idea that 'the state had to obey ethical imperatives that were senior to all other ethical demands - familial, tribal, religious, sectarian - by virtue of their universality and impartiality'" (2006:163). Such belief is very similar to Creon's arguments in Sophocles and Paulin.

> By 1980, the rhetoric of blood sacrifice, promulgated by the Nationalist leader, Padraic Pearse, in the years running up to the Easter Rising in 1916, was back in currency. The most celebrated hunger striker in the Irish Republican tradition, Thomas McSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork, who had died in Brixton Jail in 1920 after seventy-four days without food, had proclaimed: 'It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer.' Now, in 1980, with the IRA hunger strikes in the Maze Prison underway, Antigone as nationalist heroine and potential martyr was back centre stage, especially in the person of the civil-rights activist Bernadette Devlin. When Paulin's Antigone played by Veronica Quilligan sparred with Creon, it was Devlin whom audiences watched before them: You'd do more than murder | I can tell it by your eyes". (2001: 94-5)

Macintosh stresses the existence of a whole genealogy of sacrificial martyrdom in Ireland that predates Bernadette Devlin's association with Antigone. In other words, Paulin's audience was already familiar with native histories of extreme blood sacrifice before they learned about the identity of the Irish woman represented by Antigone. The Greek heroine's determination to go to great lengths for her ideals and defy death finds a familiar place in the Irish psyche. In fact, one of the last statements that Antigone makes in *The Riot Act* before dying could be understood as a self-proclaimed entry to this long Irish tradition of personal sacrifice:

> *There were others like me.*
> Niobe, I heard it said,
> Was turned to stone. (*RA*: 45; italics mine)

The same could be argued about Bernadette Devlin. Her conspicuous linking to Antigone is rooted in a rich tradition of personal sacrifice in the face of a higher authority, as this phenomenon spread in Ireland across the 20th century. Although she did not pay with her life, Devlin is the final member in a long line of Irish rebels who risked everything for a cause they passionately considered just, whether this is Ireland's independence or social justice in the North.

Still, there are more examples in *The Riot Act* that urge one to connect Antigone and Devlin. Similar to the tactics that Paulin followed with Creon's characterization, there are certain occasions in the play that the audience hears Antigone speaking and instantly imagines the prominent Irish woman. One can see this in the following statement Antigone makes about her true motives to bury Polyneices:

> It's never pride,
> not pride that's pushing me –
> it's my own soul and honour

I can nor bend nor sell. (*Ibid*. 14)

Antigone maintains that her intentions are pure and innocent, with no personal benefit to be gained from her transgression. Antigone basically confesses that she defied Creon's edict, only because her conscience and morality restrained her from acting differently. Especially, the double phonetic correspondence in Antigone's words between "soul" and "sell" and "honour" and "nor", is a witty move from Paulin's part to seal Antigone's personal ethics.

Upon a second reading, however, Antigone's mentioning about her soul that cannot be bought calls to mind Bernadette Devlin, who in 1969 published her autobiography bearing the corresponding title *The Price of My Soul*. Devlin's autobiography offers a critical look at the impasse in the North and its chronology.[27] As Devlin explains in the introduction to her book: "I have written this book in an attempt to explain how the complex of economic, social, and political problems of Northern Ireland threw up the phenomenon of Bernadette Devlin" (1969: vii). In the same introduction, Devlin also explains the alluring tittle of her autobiography, maintaining that she used this phrase ironically, reversing its original meaning: "*The Price of My Soul* refers not to the price which I would be prepared to sell out, but rather to the price we must all pay to preserve our own integrity" (*Ibid*. viii). With this clarification, Paulin's appropriation of Devlin's phrase is fully understood. Embracing Devlin's theorization, Antigone will pay with her life to keep her soul intact.

To give a brief overview, *The Price of My Soul* begins with Devlin's upbringing and tells how she got involved with the Civil Right Movement from its early stages until the protests reached their climax. Devlin also provides a vivid first-person account of the riotous Derry March that precipitated the three decades of sectarian strife in the North, describing it as follows: "What had started as a clash between civil-rights supporters and Paisleyites had developed into sheer faction fighting between the Catholics and the police, and to the people of the Bogside, the police were fighting on behalf of the Protestants" (1969: 185). Devlin's testimony is remarkable, as it pinpoints Paisleyan politics as a factor at play since the incipit of the Troubles. The book finishes with Devlin's election in the House of Commons, along with a fervent promise that the Unionist Party government that has ruled Northern Ireland since partition will soon come to an end: "For half a century it has misgoverned us, but it is on the way out. Now we are witnessing its dying

[27] With the hindsight we have now about the outcome of the Troubles, some of the early observations that Devlin made in her autobiography prove disturbingly prophetic. The following extract is a characteristic example of this: "Everyone knows there are ills in our society, but if you have a job you content yourself with it and mind your own business. No criticism, no urge to go out and make progress can be afforded because these might disturb the delicate balance of the peace. Just how delicate this balance is was proved in 1968 when the civil-rights movement's demand for simple justice send the country up in flames" (1969: 49).

convulsions. And with traditional Irish mercy, when we've got it down we will kick it into the ground" (*Ibid*. 224).

Surely, this last remark has something of Antigone's temperament in it. An impassionate Devlin openly declares that there is nothing that keeps her from achieving her goal of social justice and equality. Her prevalent fanaticism and absolute wrath towards the Northern Irish government is an attribute that also Paulin's Antigone shares. Look, for instance, what Antigone answers back to Creon when admonished by the latter about the illegality of her actions:

> It was never Zeus
> Made that law.
> Down in the dark earth
> There's no law says,
> 'Break with your own kin,
> Go lick the state.' (*RA*: 27)

Both Antigone and Devlin find fault with the authority they are subject to, viewing it as a hindrance rather than a guarantor of justice and security. As a response to this, revolutionary action is what both women recommend. Devlin wants to completely overthrow the existing Northern Irish government and work to create a more just state in the North, while Antigone deliberately snubs the Creonian law system in the face of a supreme divine law that commands the burial of the dead.

To conclude with Devlin, her ideological feud with Paisley is not a product of Paulin's imagination but is based on real facts. In her biographical account, Devlin offers an elaborate portrait of Paisley's character and politics. Unsurprisingly, her words are not very flattering:

> The Reverend Ian Paisley, self-styled Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, is to my mind a dangerous man and an influence for evil… He came to power in the 1950's preaching a militant anti-popery, and his appeal for his followers lies both in their strong religious feelings and in their fear that the depressed Catholic third of the population would, by getting a share of power, rob them of the small measure of prosperity and security they now have. (1969: 106-7)

Paisley's obsession of not sharing power with the Ulster Catholics is also implied in *The Riot Act*, where the Messenger laments Creon's imminent destruction: "Take Creon now – that man… *shared power with no man*… He could neither bend nor listen. He held firm just that shade too long. There was no joy nor give in him ever" (*RA*: 56; italics mine). Paulin here insinuates that Creon's downfall was due to his unwillingness to compromise and exhibit flexibility in political matters. Borrowing a distinctive Paisleyan phraseology to convey this belief, in turn suggests that

Paulin predicts the same outcome for the Ulster bigot: Paisley's tactics will bring him to his knees, like Creon.

To recapitulate, in this section we saw how Paulin uses the clash between Antigone and Creon to introduce on stage two of the most prominent figures of the Troubles. Paulin identifies Ian Paisley and Bernadette Devlin as the standard-bearers of the opposing Unionist and Republican camps, and accordingly assigns them the roles of the main antagonists of *The Rio Act*. For Paulin, Paisley and Devlin are the two figures *par excellence* to respectively wear the masks of Creon and Antigone and, in doing so, to represent on stage the conflicting ideologies of the two dissenting traditions in Northern Ireland. In the next section, we will explore how Antigone emerges victorious in this duel, and how, in doing so, Paulin endorses Devlin's politics over Paisley's.

'Aye, Changed it Utterly': Antigone's Triumph at *The Riot Act's* Finale

The outcome of *The Riot Act* leaves little room for doubt. Antigone dies but she triumphs. Creon, on the other hand, though still alive, gets utterly destroyed. As we will see in this section, Paulin introduces a sense of poetic justice casted upon the two conflicting characters. Creon's falling to pieces is portrayed by Paulin as a deserved ending, a fair consequence of his malicious behaviour.[28] In fact, Paulin understands poetic justice quite literally: Paulin puts in Creon's mouth one of W. B. Yeats's most well-known poetic lines to express Creon's downfall and regret in *The Riot Act*. By appropriating "a crucial phrase from Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916' referring to the impact of the 1916 rising" (Arkins 2010: 39), Creon indirectly admits his fault and vindicates Antigone. At the play's finale, Creon gives up his bureaucratic jargon and speaks instead the language of Antigone, which is a poetic language. This way, Creon eventually embraces Antigone's worldview, which he previously denied. With this unexpected turnaround, Paulin elevates Irish poetry as a source of truth and as an ethical standard. Having exposed the self-serving limitations of political speech and the dishonesty of those sticking to it, Paulin celebrates poetic language as a timeless beacon of light in the dark turns of Irish history.

Creon's tragedy is that he eventually changes his mind over Polyneices and Antigone, but this happens too late. In his penultimate appearance on stage, Creon finally considers Tiresias' warnings, and although evidently at a loss, he obediently follows the instructions of the Chorus:

> Creon: What'd you have me do then?
> Chorus Leader: Let the girl go free,
> and rest him in his grave.
> Creon: Back down, you're saying?
> Chorus Leader: You've still got time.
> Creon: We can't fight nature.
> It grates, but.
> Chorus Leader: Go quick now.
> Just you and no one else.
> Creon: Boys, go build the pyre –
> you can be gentle

[28] Interestingly, Creon's clear defeat is seen by some critics as one of the biggest weaknesses of Paulin's play, since it erases any sense of tragic pity originally bestowed to him by Sophocles. As Marillynn Richtarik explains: "Paulin in his own version of *Antigone* would presumably attempt to redress the balance between Creon and Antigone. It is intriguing, then, that one of the most telling criticisms levelled against Paulin's version of the play was that he had cheapened the character of Creon, reducing tragedy to what Michael Billington described as 'political melodrama'. Billington commented, 'When Creon at the end cried 'Pity me if you can, blind and thick' I simply felt an Ulster demagogue was receiving his comeuppance.' Several other critics reached similar conclusions" (1995: 218).

with his body now.
Antigone, I'll set her free.
It's best we keep that custom. (*RA*: 54-5)

Creon thinks that by building the funeral pyre of Polyneices and setting Antigone free, he will escape danger and things will come to peace. Creon's admittance that "We can't fight nature" is an indirect way of accepting the innate inferiority of the man-made laws of the *polis* compared to "the laws set among men by the Justice who dwells with the gods below" (Jebb 1897: 41) (*τῶν κάτω θεῶν Δίκη τοιούσδ᾽ ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ὥρισεν νόμους*) (*Ant*. 451-2). But the delay to reach this conclusion has already taken its toll. In the meantime, Antigone kills herself in her cave prison, and as the news spread, the suicides of her fiancé Haemon and his mother Eurydice follow. Creon is the sole main character to remain alive, but as Paulin will make very clear, this is the gravest form of punishment he could ever imagine.

Creon's impeding catastrophe is foreshadowed by the Messenger's announcement about Haemon's suicide: "There's blood, I'm saying. | Aye, and guilt too" (*RA*: 56). As these words demonstrate, the overwhelming feeling of regret is already palpable in the atmosphere moments before Creon enters the stage for his final speech. At this point, Creon's liability for the bloodshed is a viewpoint shared by the rest of the characters:

Chorus: So? Who died?
Who killed them?
Would you tell us?
Messenger: Haemon's dead.
Chorus: Who killed him?
Messenger: He killed himself.
It was this mad anger
at his father made him.
Chorus: The blind one saw it all.
Messenger: You're right to say it.
But there's worse yet. (*Ibid*. 56-7)

"The blind one" is, of course, Tiresias, who was initially humiliated by Creon but is now commended by the Chorus, as his words have proven to be true. Ironically enough, Creon's stubbornness and poor judgment have made him the blind one, with Tiresias being the one with clear sight.

Another indication that Creon has belatedly come to accept Antigone's stance can be traced in the Messenger's description of Polyneices funeral, supervised by Creon:

And then we washed him,
took olive branches
and green laurel leaves
to crown and lap him in –
we burnt him then. (*Ibid*. 58)

The choice of flora to adorn Polyneices serves a clear symbolic purpose. The olive branches and laurel leaves are considered universal emblems of peace. Moreover, the reference to the laurels around Polynices' head being green is not accidental, as green is often associated with Ireland. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that what is at stake here is peace in Ireland, particularly in its Northern region. With this funeral description, Paulin makes a bold statement about the necessity of peace talks in his country. Given that it is Creon who observes the funeral rites, one can understand that Paulin suggests a potential change of mind among Unionists, a coming closer to the Republican position. Within this framework, Creon, and by extension figures like Conor Cruise O'Brien and Ian Paisley, must deeply reconsider their politics to facilitate peace negotiations.

Returning to *The Riot Act*, the feel of imminent disaster is already hanging over the theatrical stage. Everything is now in place for Creon's final appearance. As he enters the stage, Creon immediately acknowledges his culpability for the turmoil that has befallen his household, realizing that he changed his mind too late:

Creon: Pity me, if you can.
Blind and thick,
a wretched, sinful man.
Chorus: It was too late
you changed your mind.
Creon: I changed it, but.
Aye, changed it utterly.
Son, what god was it
that sent me *wild*?
And, son,
how ever did I harm you?
How could I do that
My own *wee man*? (*Ibid*. 59-60; italics mine)

In the preceding dialogue with the Chorus, Creon reveals a profound transformation in his beliefs and consciousness. This is made clear by the register of language that he uses. Going for semantically charged words like "wild" or Irishisms like "wee man" to express his grief for the

death of his son, Creon essentially speaks Antigone's tongue. For instance, a few moments later Creon tenderly addresses Haemon as his "bairn" (*Ibid*. 61), which is a colloquialism for 'child'. Earlier in *The Riot Act*, Antigone has uttered the same word. When she is sentenced to death by Creon and dragged by the Guard to her prison, Antigone sings the following threnody:

> 'I heard her cry
> as I climbed the track –
> my friends are cold
> though *my bairns are dead*' (*Ibid*. 46; italics mine)

Having no one to mourn her, this is a lament song that Antigone sings to herself. As Anthony Roche observes, "Antigone sings her own dirge with snatches of an anonymous folk-song" (1988: 228). This is a crucial moment for the Hibernicization of Antigone's death by Paulin: by featuring this characteristic mourning melody, Paulin links Antigone with the tradition of Irish sacrificial martyrdom, as "one of the most popular responses to this sacrificial attitude has been the emergence of ballads, snatches or rhymes which, like myths, are often authored by nobody yet known to everybody" (Kearney 1985: 67). With this in mind, the fact that Creon uses a key phrase from Antigone's lament to express his own grief over the death of Haemon is a powerful indicator that now Creon finds himself in agreement with the ideals that Antigone embodies concerning the treatment of the dead. With his *bairn* dead, Creon learns a bitter lesson about the reverence the living must show to the dead.

Overall, having lost his credibility together with his former verbal eloquence, Creon stands naked before the audience of *The Riot Act*: "In the face of the loss of his family, Creon cannot muster the formal structures of the standard he employed earlier, and instead, in broken syntax, he calls himself 'cack-handed... Creon [who's] made a right blood-mess' of things" (Doyle 2000: 189). The fictitiousness of Creon's public discourse has now been laid bare. This revelation carries broader implications, as the loss of his public voice renders Creon's rule illegitimate. Left with no recourse, Creon must fully accept responsibility for his actions: "All I want's the dark" (*RA*: 62), he exclaims in agony. This pitiful remark calls to mind an earlier statement in the play: "our enemies – *they're in the dark just*. They're ancient history" (*Ibid*. 15; italics mine). Without ever imagining it, Creon ends up sharing the same misfortune.

These instances highlight Creon's transformation. Both his pompous vocabulary and arrogant demeanour have vanished. No longer able to engage in power games, Creon speaks the language of the common people:

> In his transformation, Creon finds a means of uniting his public, poetic voice with the colloquial Irish of his roots. Gone are both the literally and figuratively prosaic tones of Unionist palaver we see in his first speech and the almost bestial quality created when, in dealing with first the Guard and then Antigone, the nastier side of his nature burbles through crack in the public facade. Now, when all seems lost, we see a Creon transformed, and the transformation is expressed above all through language. (Jones 1997: 237)

By making Creon speak in dialect, Paulin reveals Creon's covert identity, the secret about "his 'Northernness', his bond not only with Antigone but also with the rest of his city's population" (Doyle 2000: 180). Being preoccupied with maintaining his power at all costs, Creon has forgotten his ties with the community he presides over. It takes a triple tragedy to finally recognize that he shares more than he would like to admit with those he always considered his inferiors. The extreme shift in Creon's way of talking is a natural outcome of this bitter acknowledgement.

The key word in Creon's lament is "change". The Chorus reprimands him that "you changed your mind", with Creon affirming that "Aye, changed it utterly". This assertion serves as proof that Antigone emerged victorious in their duel: "Creon is eventually forced to change his mind and achieve knowledge (*anagnorisis*)" (Arkins 2011: 39). However, there is a deeper layer of meaning in Creon's words. For an Irish audience, Creon's acknowledgment of defeat and his immediate transformation call to mind W. B. Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916'. Yeats wrote this poem to commemorate the failed Irish rebellion, in which he memorializes the instigators of the uprising, people whom Yeats was previously acquainted with. Seven times in the poem, Yeats employs the word 'change' to indicate how, in revolutionary times, common people whom the Irish poet had shunned in the past "with a nod of the head | or polite meaningless words" (1996:180) can be transformed into emblems of a terrible beauty. The transformation that these Irish revolutionaries experience after sacrificing themselves for Ireland's independence is profound yet positive. As Kearney states: "Yeats admits that those rebel leaders whom he had previously dismissed 'in a mocking tale or gibe' have been 'transformed utterly' by the mythic rite of blood-sacrifice. The motley crew of disparate individuals have been transmuted into a visionary sect" (1985: 71). The rebellion may have been put down, but for Yeats, the collective sacrifice of its initiators will be a lasting source of reverence and wonder.

Specifically, in the concluding lines of 'Easter, 1916', Yeats writes:

> I write it out in a verse—
> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn,

Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (1996: 180; italics mine)

Similar to Paulin's use of 'green laurel leaves', Yeats prominently employs the colour green to symbolize Ireland. He suggests that whenever Ireland's fate is at stake, be it in the present or the future, the legacy of the 1916 Easter revolutionaries will come to mind. Yeats believes that the transformation experienced by these Irish rebels is enduring, transcending their individual traits. Instead, their collective sacrifice fosters a sense of unity. In the Irish collective consciousness, the Easter Rising conspirators have transformed into a national symbol of courage and resistance.

Arguably, Creon's transformation in *The Riot Act* is not positive. No "terrible beauty" is born from his change of mind. In fact, quite the opposite; a terrible pain awaits Creon. "I'm thick with sin" (*RA*: 61), he roars. Unlike the Irish revolutionaries, Creon's trajectory has nothing commendable. One therefore rightly wonders why Paulin linked Creon's downfall with the commemoration of the Easter Rising by Yeats. One plausible answer could be that Paulin wanted to associate Creon with the Republican ideas for which the Irish rebels gave their lives. Having before identified Creon with the Unionist politics of segregation, Paulin evokes Yeats to accentuate the deep change in Creon's ideology. At *The Riot Act*'s finale Creon stands as an ally of Antigone, and by extension of Bernadette Devlin. Through this unexpected conclusion, Paulin implies that bringing an end to the Troubles requires a significant political shift from the Unionist side.

An alternative, more cynical interpretation of this episode, would be that Paulin had Creon echo Yeats's renowned words to solidify his transformation from being a formidable ruler to a state of utter defeat and insignificance. Creon is truly "changed utterly", as he plummets from grace into an irreparable journey of self-loathing. His misery is complete and irreversible, a point that Paulin underscores through the subsequent lines, using the contrasting elements of light and darkness once more:

The full guilt's mine.
Show me the door just,
then chuck this dead one out.
Let it come, aye, let it come.
I want no light at all. (*Ibid*. 62; italics mine)

Still, there is something else that we could take from Creon's destruction. His devastating condition might well be seen as an advice to two well-known Irishmen, thoroughly discussed in this chapter. Given Creon's unmistaken association with Ian Paisley and Paulin's notorious dispute with Conor Cruise O'Brien over Antigone's place in Ireland, Creon's collapse at the end of *The Riot Act* could serve as a cautionary tale for both men. In this case, Paulin voices to his political

adversaries that if they adhere to their Creon-like beliefs, they risk sharing Creon's fate. "There is no happiness, but there can be wisdom" (*Ibid*. 63), is the final verdict made by the Chorus. This could very well be the moral of *The Riot Act*. With Creon left in tatters, those who previously identified with him must wise up and change their course of action.

To conclude this section, regardless of which of the above interpretations one finds more compelling, it is essential to contrast Creon's claim that he "changed utterly" with the political backdrop of the Troubles and interpret it accordingly. The fact that both Antigone and Creon can be linked to some of the most prominent figures of the conflict leaves no room for doubt that we must evaluate Antigone's vindication and Creon's defeat within the context of Northern Ireland. *The Riot Act* is a play that resonates with the complex facets of the ethno-religious conflict in Northern Ireland during the mid-1980s, a period when the demand for 'change' was gaining momentum. Consequently, while intending to create a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* to serve as a symbolic representation for the turbulent politics of the Troubles, Paulin ultimately crafts a play with undeniable contemporary relevance and significance. *The Riot Act* is not merely an adaptation of a Greek tragedy; it stands as a distinct contemporary Northern Irish play with its own unique character.

A Greek Heroine of the Troubles: The Rescuing of Antigone's Legacy in Northern Ireland

After closely tracking the development of *The Riot Act*, from its conception to its finale, we can conclude the following about the overall influence of Paulin's play and the subsequent impact of his enthralling portrayal of Antigone: Paulin is not the first author to situate the Greek heroine in a (Northern) Irish context, but his main achievement in *The Riot Act* is the reconsideration of Antigone in relation to the Northern Irish affairs and the Troubles. Paulin thus introduces a significant shift in the way Antigone's rebellion is viewed amid the urgent challenges confronting Northern Ireland.

Looking at the history of reception of Antigone in Northern Ireland, what one quickly discovers is that the critical evaluation of the female heroine has passed through various phases. Specifically, we observed how Paulin's adaptation came as a response to previous unfavourable depictions of Antigone. Prior to Paulin, primarily due to Conor Cruise O'Brien's negative focus on her, the assessment of Antigone's *exemplum* in the context of Northern Ireland was far from positive. Antigone's transgression was perceived as closely connected to the unsettling turmoil in the North. Thus, for a significant period, the prevailing reading of the tragedy suggested that Antigone introduced unwarranted unrest and should be seen as an opponent of those striving for peace in Northern Ireland. Paulin vehemently opposed this interpretation and took action to redress the balance. With *The Riot Act*, Paulin attempts to save Antigone's reputation. In his own rendition of the Sophoclean tragedy, Paulin posits that Antigone's defiance is not an example to be shunned but one to be emulated. To emphasize this further, in *The Riot Act* Antigone prevails over Creon, who, in turn, witnesses his authority crumble. Unlike O'Brien's insistence that Creon's sphere of influence must be respected at all costs to ensure peace and stability in Northern Ireland, Paulin does not hesitate to bring Creon to his knees. By overturning O'Brien's interpretation, Paulin promotes a favorable outlook on Antigone's rebellion in connection to Northern Irish politics.

It should also be noted that regardless of which of the two interpretations one chooses, the remarkable flexibility of the Antigone story as a source of commentary on the developments in Northern Ireland can hardly be denied. As the intellectual confrontation between Paulin and O'Brien made evident, the tragedy is subject to both Unionist and Republican readings. Clearly, the eternal conflict between Antigone and Creon offers multiple perspectives for exploration, and as seen in the context of the play's reception in Northern Ireland, conflicting political ideologies manage to successfully align themselves with the Sophoclean tragedy. From an outsider's perspective, and after a considerable amount of time has passed since the end of the Troubles, one is less inclined in trying to determine which of the two opposing perspectives is more truthful

or valid. Instead, one is struck by the divergent possibilities that the reception of Antigone's story in Northern Ireland offers. Leaving aside the expectation for definite answers, one begins to recognize that the allure and, ultimately, the strength of Antigone's rebellion reside in the breadth of its applicability.

Another intriguing aspect that came to the fore during this investigation is that the dispute over Antigone's legacy in Northern Ireland did not primarily unfold on the theatrical stage. In fact, the staging of *Antigone* was a later development. Prior to the premiere of *The Riot Act*, the conversation over Antigone's place had already begun in university debate chambers, newspaper articles, and essays published in books. In a way, before taking up the theatre, the spirit of Antigone was already present in the streets. The unanimous identification of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey as a modern-day Antigone, by both friends and foes, attests to this. Additionally, when considering the striking parallels between Ian Paisley's politics and Creon's rule, it becomes evident that the Antigonean thematics were deeply ingrained in the Northern Irish collective consciousness. Therefore, *The Riot Act* is not the initial instance where these connections became apparent, but rather the culmination of this phenomenon.

Also, judging from the extratextual information we gathered about the creative process of writing *The Riot Act*, Paulin was particularly drawn to retell Antigone's story because he first saw it being enacted in real life. In fact, the correlation between Paulin's protagonists and real individuals, along with the political commentary he makes on the Troubles by appropriating the tragedy of *Antigone*, might lead one to perceive *The Riot Act* as a somewhat unconventional *Roman à clef*. Antigone's revolutionary fervour and erratic behaviour, Creon's absolutism and abusive rule, even Ismene's passivity and acceptance of the *status quo*, no matter how unfavourable, are all personality traits that could be attributed to specific individuals or, at the very least, used to describe collective behaviours and tendencies exhibited by conflicting groups during the Troubles. Surely, there are many occasions in *The Riot Act*, where members of the original Derry audience – a mixed Catholic and Protestant crowd – must have recognized themselves or their less agreeable neighbours in the verbal exchanges between the characters.

The primary means of identification between the protagonists and the audience is none other than the language employed. Paulin has succeeded significantly in capturing the language of the Troubles and seamlessly integrating it into his play. At hindsight, this is no small feat. Through the various passages quoted and analyzed, we observed the complexity and richness of this special language and its various manifestations. For instance, Creon's opening speech serves as an illustration of the vagueness and duplicity that characterized political discourse in Northern Ireland. During a time when a political solution to the Troubles remained a distant hope, the lack of credibility among those in power was most prominently reflected in the content and style of their speeches. For Paulin, power politics and the politics of language are inherently intertwined.

For instance, the British dominion in Northern Ireland is marked by Creon's highbrowed Oxbridge tone, which sharply contrasts with the Ulster demotic spoken by the rest of the populace. The critique is obvious: those in power speak differently from those they govern. That being said, the widespread use of the Hiberno-English dialect by the play's protagonists in their private interactions is unquestionably the method by which *The Riot Act* gains topical resonance. Paulin has his characters speak in the common people's vernacular. Especially, peripheral characters such as the Guard and the Messenger speak in the manner typical of working-class residents of Ulster. Consequently, Paulin succeeds in documenting the cultural lexicon of a particularly traumatic era for Northern Ireland. By centering on Northern slang, Paulin commemorates how the Troubles were experienced and articulated by those who directly witnessed them. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Paulin imparts an ethical dimension to the use of Hiberno-English. Creon, upon realizing how terribly wrong he was and with the catastrophe impending, forgets his earlier eloquent verbosity, drastically changes his tone, and cries his heart out in the local dialect. As previously argued, this marks a symbolic turn in *The Riot Act*. Creon comes to embrace Antigone's worldview by speaking her language.

Another significant moment in *The Riot Act* is the association of Antigone's rebellion to the 1916 Easter Rising and W. B. Yeats's poem about this historic event. Once again, it is Creon, defeated and having undergone a change of heart, who establishes this connection when, in his lament, he appropriates one of the poem's most famous lines. Specifically, like Yeats's perspective on the Easter rebels, Creon's opinion of Antigone "changed utterly". This transformation occurred after both the Irish revolutionaries and Antigone paid, respectively, with their lives for certain causes they deemed just. Thus, Paulin, following in the footsteps of Yeats, memorializes Antigone's sacrifice in *The Riot Act*. The explicit link between his theatrical play and Yeats's poetry serves a clear purpose: Paulin intends to firmly place *The Riot Act* within the Irish literary tradition. While never obscuring its evident Greek ancestry, Paulin creates a play that thematically engages with the Irish canon. Overall, the *Riot Act* is a good example of how a product of Classical reception can simultaneously be regarded an independent work of art with contemporary topical relevance. To this end, Paulin successfully Irishizes his adaptation by referring to one of Ireland's greatest poets. However, there is more to discuss regarding this decision, and how it affects the characterization of Antigone in *The Riot Act*. With the spectre of Yeats hanging on, Antigone joins the tradition of Irish republicans fighting for Ireland's independence. Metaphorically, as the play reaches its conclusion, Antigone removes her Greek mantle and wears green. Especially for the initial audience of *The Riot Act* – well-versed in every nuanced or overt Irish element of the play – it is indisputable that, as the curtains fell, Antigone must have been perceived as an authentic Irish heroine.

To conclude, what this examination has hopefully shown, is that to fully appreciate the impact and depth of *The Riot Act*, it is essential to read it within the context of the Troubles and the broader framework of Irish history. As this detailed analysis has demonstrated, *The Riot Act*, through its language, characters, and references, consistently alludes to the ongoing unrest in the North. Neglecting those aspects would significantly restrict one's comprehension of Paulin's play. Indeed, the abundance of Northern Irish references found throughout *The Riot Act* establishes Paulin's adaptation as an exemplar of Northern Irish drama, offering a vivid representation of a traumatic epoch for everyone living North of the border. Paulin's most significant achievement with *The Riot Act* is creating a play that, while never obscuring or denying its Greek ancestry and its thematic connection to Sophocles' *Antigone*, ultimately develops a distinct identity of its own.

CHAPTER II

Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* & *The Burial at Thebes*: Greek Tragedy for Every Irish Occasion

Better Call Seamus: A Poet Turned Playwright

As a playwright, Seamus Heaney has engaged with Greek tragedy on two separate occasions, with a significant time span between the two instances. The first time was with *The Cure at Troy* (1990), an adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Fourteen years later, *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) marks the second time that the Irish poet appropriates a Sophoclean text, this time *Antigone*. Naturally, the contexts from which the two Irish versions of the Greek plays arise, are quite distinct. *The Cure at Troy* was first staged on 1 October 1990 in Northern Ireland, at the Guildhall in Derry, pretty much in the heyday of the Troubles. It was produced by the Field Day Theatre Company, the cultural enterprise dedicated to actively participating in the political upheaval in Northern Ireland. Heaney joined the Company after receiving an invitation by its co-founders, the playwright Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea. In this context, the embracement of Philoctetes' predicament – the hero's stubborn devotion to the contemplation of his leg wound instead of eagerly seeking for a cure – serves as an ample metaphor for the enduring deadlock in Northern Ireland. Yet, Heaney does not give in. As will be clarified later, *The Cure at Troy*, a play whose title forecasts imminent redemption, comes as a breath of hope amidst the darkest of times.[1]

The Burial at Thebes, on the other hand, hit the stage during less turbulent times, post-Good Friday Agreement, this time in the Republic of Ireland. It premiered on 5 April 2004 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Curiously, the motivation behind Heaney's reception of *Antigone* was celebratory. The Abbey, Ireland's national theatre, was commemorating its centenary, and *Antigone* could not be missing from the festive programme. Heaney was specifically commissioned to come up with a rendition of the famous Sophoclean tragedy, a Greek play that, arguably, has a rich and intricate history of reception in Ireland, reinforcing the idea that Antigone is a heroine firmly intertwined with Ireland. Still, Heaney's version of the play manages to thematically distinguish itself from its predecessors, since in its scope it looks as much towards outside the Irish borders as contemplating local affairs. For instance, the US army invasion into

[1] As McGuire observes in retrospect: "The play anticipates a series of debates that would, in subsequent decades, come to define the social and political landscape of Northern Ireland; these include confronting the past, the tension between notions of remembering and forgetting and the broader challenges of achieving transitional justice in the aftermath of political conflict" (2016: 19).

Iraq as a palpable consequence to the 'War on Terror' pronouncement made by the George W. Bush administration at the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is not left unnoticed when one reads between the lines of Heaney's adaptation; nor does Heaney miss out the chance of criticizing the whole Bushian rhetoric of 'Good *versus* Evil' when his Creon enters the stage. Nevertheless, as will be shown, *The Burial at Thebes* is equally informed by a set of home-grown traditions like Irish lament songs and other elaborate keening rituals.

Admittedly, neither of these two Heaneyan renditions are the first of their sort. Although not widely known, there has been another contemporary Irish play that is based on *Philoctetes*, albeit more loosely. Sydney B. Smith's *Sherca* (1979), a play that "completely transfers the setting from ancient Greece to modern Ireland, with Lemnos in the North-east Aegean becoming Sherca off the west coast of Ireland" (Arkins 2010: 68), is an extraordinary precursor in the history of reception of *Philoctetes* in Ireland.[2] The title of Smith's play is taken from the actual Inisherk, a little island in County Galway that was formerly inhabited but now – like Lemnos in Sophocles' tragedy – remains abandoned. In *Sherca*, the Greek names are somewhat altered: "Odysseus becomes O'Dea, Neoptolemus is Leo and Philoctetes simply Phil. Smith adopts Hibernicised and truncated versions of the original names, thereby underlining the fragmented and conflicting nature of the characters themselves" (Salis 2005: 149). Moreover, unlike his Sophoclean counterpart, Phil does not suffer from a physical injury, but his affliction is chiefly psychological: Phil is a middle-aged man, an ex-member of the Communist Party, who, after falling short of his comrades, decides to break with society and seek refuge to a desolate place. Hence, Phil's exile transpires as self-willed, opposed to Philoctetes' pre-planned abandonment in Lemnos by the Achaean army. Still, in both cases, the individual isolation trope is brought under scrutiny. Commenting on the overall symbolism of a desert island, Loredana Salis underlines that:

> Islands are often deployed as metaphors for society at large, as well as being projections of individual yearnings for solitude. Islands can be a "refuge for the soul" (as is Yeats's Innisfree), and home to hermits, exiles, nomads or poets. On a more negative note, islands may be prisons and places for the outcast. However literal, romanticizing or metaphorical the notion, an island is characteristically associated with the ideas of transience, temporality, finiteness, unreliability, instability. (*Ibid*. 146)

[2] Arkins informs us that, essentially, Philoctetes had already stepped foot on Ireland in the 18th century: "in 1725, Thomas Sheridan (grandfather of Richard Brinsley) produced the first English translation of *Philoctetes*, and had it staged in Dublin before the Viceroy" (2010: 65). Additionally, Lorna Hardwick mentions that the Sophoclean play had also been staged "in the context of the alienation caused by unemployment in Belfast in 1933 when the performance was regarded as a useful occupation and fundraiser for the jobless" (2000: 92-3).

Continuing with *Philoctetes'* presence in Ireland, there is another take on the Sophoclean text, this time coming after Heaney's version. Desmond Egan´s *Philoctetes* (1998), a straightforward translation from Greek to English, similar to his *Medea* (1991). As Brian Arkins notes in the foreword to the book, "[Egan] resists any temptation to add to Sophocles – unlike e.g. Heaney who, in his version, makes the Chorus refer to Northern Ireland" (Egan 1998: 8). Finally, although Egan´s translation has never been staged by a professional theatre group, we know that his fascination with this particular Sophoclean tragedy stems from his notion that "some of the most profound issues [are] touching on human life [in] the simplest of plots" (Egan 1990: 121).

This simplicity of plot coupled with a wealth of meaning, is what also drew Heaney to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. In Heaney's hands, the story transforms into a subtle yet profoundly significant allegory for divisions in Northern Ireland and beyond, especially as an indictment of the apartheid regime in South Africa, as it is not far-fetched to draw parallels between Mandela's imprisonment on Robben island and Philoctetes' seclusion on Lemnos.[3] Therefore, on both occasions that Heaney has dealt with Greek tragedy, he appears to embrace a more international perspective than his fellow Irish playwrights, all the while maintaining a clear focus on Ireland.

Regarding *Antigone*, the fascination of Irish dramatists with the rebellious Sophoclean heroine cannot be overstated. Remarkably, "*Antigone´s* first major impact in Ireland was marked by way of its non-appearance" (Harkin 2008: 292-3). Specifically, the first modern Irish production of *Antigone* was supposed to premiere on 29 January 1907, in the newly built Abbey Theatre. The founders of the theatre, W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta, had requested from Robert Gregory to write a version of the Sophoclean tragedy. However, there was a late change of plans, and instead of an Irish *Antigone*, John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* took its place. After successfully staging Oedipus Rex in 1926, Yeats contemplated adapting Sophocles' *Antigone*. However, his plans did not materialize as he had imagined. Instead, Yeats brought an adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus* to the Irish stage in 1927. Judging from these two notoriously unsuccessful attempts to stage the Sophoclean tragedy, for the most part of the twentieth century, *Antigone* could be deemed a sort of doomed play in Ireland.[4]

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[3] Before Heaney, the Belfast-born poet Michael Longley, had spoken about the 'invisible apartheid' holding sway in the North (1985: 24). Overall, "The connection between South Africa and Ireland as emergent post-conflict societies in need of the remedy of multiple forms of transitional justice is reflected in this beneficial cross-pollination between writers… Heaney, an active supporter of the anti-apartheid movement, noted that the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and his return to active public life in South Africa was the 'miraculum' that inspired his own sense of hope for the Irish conflict as he wrote *The Cure at Troy*" (Carr Vellino 2008: 50-1). For a comparative study about the political impasse in Northern Ireland and South Africa see: Guelke (1991).

[4] For more information about the failed attempts to stage *Antigone* in Ireland see: Kentrotis Zinelis (2023: 431).

However, as we have seen, 1984 became an *annus mirabilis* for the reception of *Antigone* in Ireland, when three different versions of the tragedy saw the light.[5] Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act*, Brendan Kennelly's *Sophocles' Antigone: A New Version*, and Aidan Carl Mathews' *The Antigone*, were all written that same year. Then, we have the twenty-first century re-invigorations of the play: Conall Morrison's *Antigone* (2003) and Owen McCafferty's *Antigone* (2008). Next in line are two more plays that share a thematic affinity to the Sophoclean text, but this time the adaptor's focus is on Antigone's sister, Ismene. Both Stacey Gregg's *Ismene* (2007) and Colm Tóibín's *Pale Sister* (2019) pay homage to the often-overlooked sister of Antigone. Finally, Colin Murphy, recently saw his version of *Antigone* made its debut in November 2020 at LexIcon in Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin.

Arguably then, none of the two Sophoclean plays were new or unfamiliar to Ireland when Heaney took up the challenge of producing a new version of them for the theatre public.[6] Although *Antigone* is the most frequently performed Greek play in Ireland, *Philoctetes* also got its fair share of reception. Therefore, Heaney was not only faced with the challenge of reworking the ancient texts *per se*, but also had to deal with the fact that the outcome of his work would be measured against a well-entrenched tradition of classical reception. Heaney was quite aware of this phenomenon and its repercussions, as we may see from this comment:

> At the beginning of 2003, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin invited me to do a version of *Antigone* for the centenary of the theatre, which occurs this year. I was honoured and attracted, but unsure if I could take it on. For a start, the play had been translated and adapted so often, and had been co-opted into so many cultural and political arguments, it had begun to feel less like a text from the theatrical repertoire and more like a pretext for debate, a work that was as much if not more at home in the seminar room that on the stage.[7] (2004b: 414)

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[5] Tom Paulin actually counts five 1984 *Antigones*: "There were three different versions of *Antigone* produced in Ireland in 1984, or four if one count's Fugard's *The Island*, or five with the film *Anne Devlin*, about Robert Emmet's housekeeper" (2002: 166). Also considering that George Steiner's *Antigones*, the seminal work on the reception of Antigone's legend in Western thought, was also published in 1984, one is struck dumb with the developments that this calendar year brought to the Antigonean legacy.

[6] Heaney has also come up with a verse rendition of Sophocles' *Ajax*, retelling the episode where the disrespected hero loses his senses and slaughters the Greek cattle believing that it is Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus. "Testimony: The Ajax Incident" was first published in *Times Literary Supplement* on 25 November 2004, but, as Joanna Kruczkowska underlines, the poem was eventually "excluded from *District and Circle*" (2017: 279). It is also noteworthy to stress that Sophocles does not enjoy a monopoly as Heaney's sole Greek tragedian, since "a version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* had been projected as a response to the IRA ceasefire of 1994 but was displaced by one of Heaney's most interesting engagements with Greek tragedy, the *Agamemnon*-inspired, poetic-sequence 'Mycenae Lookout'" (Harrison & Macintosh 2019: 2).

[7] Heaney's assumption that nowadays *Antigone* befits more the classroom than the stage resonates his prior experience with the tragedy. As he confesses to *The Irish Times* on 3 April 2004, two days before the

Heaney's hesitance to adapt *Antigone* once again reveals his concern that the thematic elements of *Antigone* may have been overused, reaching a point where their application to recent historical events has become exhausted.

Specifically, by suggesting that *Antigone* now belongs more to the forum than the stage, Heaney highlights the diverse use of Antigone's *exemplum* of civil disobedience in various historico-cultural contexts, worldwide but also notably in Ireland. Heaney feared that the prolonged reception of Sophocles' heroine had made Antigone a kind of caricature of herself. It seemed that, due to the chronic overuse, the potency of Antigone's message had weakened. As Heaney mentions on another occasion regarding adapting *Antigone*:

> The invitation to do this job came from Ben Barnes at the Abbey Theatre. In 2004 the Abbey was celebrating its centenary and the artistic director wanted to have at least one classical tragedy in the centennial repertoire. I was honoured to be asked, and was attracted to the commission, not least because W. B. Yeats had done versions of Sophocles' two other Theban plays for the theatre, but I still wasn't sure how to respond. How many Antigones could Irish theatre put up with?... I was reading desultorily about the play in various essays and introductions and glazing over as again and again the old familiar topics came swimming up: individual conscience versus civil power, men versus women, the domestic versus the public sphere, the relevance of the action in times of crisis, in France, in Russia, in Poland, in Northern Ireland - of course, of course, of course. But why do it again? Indeed, how do it again, if there wasn't a tuning fork? (2005: 170-1)

Heaney ultimately succumbed to the temptation of engaging with Antigone, giving rise to *The Burial at Thebes*. What remains to be uncovered is the so-called tuning fork, namely which element prompted Heaney to have Antigone pay Ireland another visit. Consequently, the section dedicated to Heaney's version of *Antigone* will illuminate all aspects through which the playwright made this illustrious heroine his own.

As for Heaney's decision to adapt *Philoctetes*, one could argue that it worked exactly the other way around for the playwright. It was the poet's contemporary historical milieu and the newfound sense of optimism permeating that era that sparked Heaney's interest in Philoctetes' story:

> I don't think I would have had the gall to do a play with such a consoling outcome had it not been for the extraordinary events of late 1989. In the autumn of that year, as one watched the Berlin Wall

premiere of *The Burial at Thebes*: "I taught *Antigone* to college students in a Belfast teacher-training college in 1963. I talked about it in relation to Aristotle and Greek tragedy" (Heaney 2004c).

> come down, and the philosopher president[8] come to power in Czechoslovakia, and the Romanian tyranny crumble, and so on, it was as if molten and repressed reality was erupting into history in much the same way as volcanic crisis erupts (with radiant historical consequences for the Greeks) in Philoctetes – the character *and* the play. (2002: 176)

Without doubt, the favourable conditions that had arisen to adapt *Philoctetes* made Heaney reconsider some earlier hesitations that he had, such as his unfamiliarity with the Greek language:

> I [had] declined to do versions of Greek plays for the Oxford University Press series that William Arrowsmith was editing because I didn't know the Greek language. So I didn't feel I should enter the canonical territory. But the *Philoctetes* was for a theatre company I was involved with in Derry, and I felt free to tackle it in that context.[9] (Hass & Heaney 2000: 22)

The theatre company that Heaney alludes to is Field Day. It is his direct involvement with this enterprise that paved the way for him to enter the Greek tragedy field. As Heaney confesses, he was willing to take the risk of conversing with the Greek tragedians only when this endeavour was placed under the aegis of Field Day, a prospect that Heaney had declined to the authoritative OUP.[10] In fact, Marilynn Richtarik notes that Heaney used the phrase "just my homework for Field Day" (2018: 99), when inquired about his first dramatic attempt. There is also Brian Friel's

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[8] With the somewhat bizarre term 'philosopher president' – echoing the notion of the Platonic philosopher-king – Heaney refers to Václav Havel, the last President of Czechoslovakia, and after its dissolution in 1992, the first President of the Czech Republic. Havel, like Heaney, was a renowned poet and playwright, and a person of admiration for Heaney. In an interview for *The Independent*, after he had completed his first visit to South Africa, Heaney comments about the post-apartheid South African nation: "Looking at South Africa's future, I would have to use the word 'hope' in the way that Vaclav Havel used it. Not just optimism – hope is something that is there to be worked for, is worth working for, and can work" (Heaney 2002c). As it will be argued in the section dedicated to *The Cure at Troy*, the Havel-inspired expression of 'hope' is central to Heaney's appropriation of *Philoctetes*.

[9] In the same interview we learn that Heaney first became familiar with the story of Philoctetes from Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), a collection of essays exploring the association of artistic creation with personal trauma and suffering. The final essay is dedicated to Philoctetes, whose two defining features – the wound in his leg and the invincible bow bequeathed by Hercules – comprise the book's title, thus encapsulating Wilson's overall vision regarding the means of artistic production (Hass & Heaney 2000: 22). Wilson's sketching of the creative artist is that of a morbid genius, namely "the conception of superior strength as inseparable from disability" (Wilson 1941: 287). In respect of which, Patrick Crotty recognizes a similarity between Philoctetes and Mad Sweeney (*Suibne mac Colmáin*), the protagonist of the medieval Irish tale *Buile Shuibhne* that Heaney translated into English as *Sweeney Astray* (1983): "both characters are unusually talented (Sweeney in verse-making, Philoctetes in bowmanship), fallen from former glory, greatly afflicted, and given to regaling everyone within earshot with lurid, self-pitying catalogues of misery" (1991: 119).

[10] The 'Greek Tragedy in New Translations' series that the late William Arrowsmith envisioned and still runs today, began with a translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus King* in 1989, followed by Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Euripides' *Alcestis* in 1990 – the year that *The Cure at Troy* hit the stage. One then understands that Arrowsmith wanted Heaney to be one of the very first collaborators for his ongoing translation project.

postcard to Heaney imploring him that "you have got to do something for the theatre – a translation, a version, a dramatization … You are needed. Okay?" (*Ibid*. 102). Heaney, then, was strongly encouraged by the Field Day executives to produce a play, but his choice of going full Greek and adapting *Philoctetes*, was principally his.[11]

One therefore begins to recognize that a thorough examination of the historical context of *The Cure at Troy* is as essential as the content of the adapted text itself. Without a detailed analysis of the societal impact that the politically charged Field Day initiative had on Northern Ireland, one lacks a vital interpretative tool to comprehend Heaney's decision to adapt *Philoctetes*. If *Antigone* was already too important in Ireland to be missing from Abbey's festive programme, one is prompted to consider the circumstances that led Heaney to believe that a version of *Philoctetes* would be fitting for Field Day. Therefore, a complete section of this chapter will be dedicated to the history of the Field Day Theatre Company to highlight how its artistic policies, cultural intentions, and political interventions informed Heaney's choice of that particular Sophoclean play.

In fact, although Heaney had dismissed the likelihood of translating a Greek play before the Field Day appointment, it is noteworthy that some Greek mythological elements were already present in his early writings.[12] However, a more methodical insertion of Greek material in Heaney's poetry starts with *The Haw Lantern* (1987), published three years before *The Cure at Troy*. In this volume, Heaney refers to certain Greek figures – both mythical and actual – such as Diogenes, Penelope, Socrates, and Hermes.[13]

Also in his prose writings, Heaney does not refrain from alluding to ancient Greece to mirror his own experiences and reality. In "Mossbawn", the introductory essay of *Finders Keepers* (2002), Heaney correlates his early childhood memories in the townland of Toomebridge to the

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[11] Inquired whether he chose *Philoctetes* or this was suggested to him, Heaney response was that "I chose it. I'd read about it, years before… and then it was brought to my attention again by… Michael Blumenthal [who] showed me the script of a lecture he'd given on the operation of justice in *Philoctetes*. But the main attraction was the material itself… That kind of dilemma was familiar to people on both sides of political fence in Northern Ireland. People living in a situation where to speak freely and truly on certain occasions would be regarded as letting down the side" (O'Driscoll 2008: 420).

[12] See, for instance, the volume *Door into the Dark* (1969). In 'Personal Helicon' Heaney reminisces rather regretfully his childhood habit of looking at his reflection on springs like 'big eyed Narcissus', whereas in 'Thatcher', the exceptional craftmanship of the eponymous artisan in making roofs out of straw or reeds is equalled to 'Midas touch'. Also, in 'Belderg' from *North* (1975), the poet describes the ancient quern-stones used for hand-grinding as 'One-eyed and benign', an inverted yet unmistakable reference to the brute Cyclops of the *Odyssey*. 'Antaeus' and 'Antaeus and Hercules' are two more poems from *North* with a classical subject matter, as Heaney relates the sought earthliness of his poetry to the mythical giant who was gaining his supernatural strength from contact with the soil.

[13] For a study of all classical allusions, Greek and Latin, in *The Haw Lantern* see: Dillon (1995).

phonetic sound of *omphalos*, the supposed centre of the world according to Greek mythology, situated at Delphi, where the Temple of Apollo stands erect:

> I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is County Derry in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard. There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol, snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world. Five households drew water from it. Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water. The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, *omphalos*, *omphalos*, *omphalos*.[14] (2002b: 3)

In an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney mentions that his ever-growing attraction to Greek myth was a somewhat incidental yet decisive by-product of an unexpected encounter at the time Heaney had moved to the United States to teach at Harvard as a visiting professor in 1981:

> The general availability of the classics in translation in the Cambridge bookshops also had its effect. I was reacquainting myself with the material, and with a part of myself. One book, for example, that I bought by chance – just because it was on the shelf – turned out to be of great and permanent interest: William K. Guthrie's *The Greeks and Their Gods* (1950). That's where I read about the relationship between herm and Hermes. A herm was a standing stone – in many senses: a stylized representation of Hermes erect; and Hermes, as god of travellers and marketplaces and suchlike, was connected with cairns at crossroads and stone-heaps of all sorts. Through all that, I began to connect him with my father, and so you got 'The Stone Verdict'. (O'Driscoll 2008: 293)

Heaney's experience at Harvard thus played a pivotal role in his engagement with the Greek corpus, let alone Greek tragedy. *The Cure at Troy* is dedicated to the memory of Robert Fitzgerald, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, ardent translator of Homer and Virgil, and personal mentor of Heaney. Remarkably, Heaney confesses that when the Boylston chair came up for him as well, Fitzgerald advised him to think twice before saying yes: "Robert, I believe, had

[14] Heaney has also written 'Stone of Delphi', as part of the poetic-sequence 'Shelf Life' from *Station Isla*nd (1984). In the poem, the speaker yearns to do a pilgrimage to Delphi and share his hopes and fears as an offering to the Oracle: "To be carried back to the shrine some dawn | When the sea spreads its far sun-crops to the south | and I make a morning offering again: | *that I may escape the miasma of spilled blood*, | *govern the tongue, fear hybris, fear the god* | *until he speaks in my untrammelled mouth*".

found the professorship a bigger drain or constraint that he'd bargained for… He was genuinely concerned, at any rate, about whether or not it would be good for me to take the job – afraid it might interfere with the poetry work" (*Ibid*. 273). Luckily, this was not the case for Heaney, since his time at Harvard signals a mid-career 'Greek turn' in his writings, with *The Haw Lantern* and *The Cure at Troy* to be the outcome of this newly found pathway. No wonder then that Heaney chose to articulate his rapport with Fitzgerald in Greek terms, since in his 'Sonnets from Hellas' from *Electric Light* (2001), he paints Fitzgerald as his "Harvard Nestor, | Sponsor and host, translator of all Homer".[15]

It should also be noted that although Heaney's involvement with Latin will not be thoroughly examined in this chapter, one cannot completely overlook his deep-seated engagement with authors like Horace and Virgil. Having studied Latin as a schoolboy at St Columb's College in Derry, and having attended Catholic Mass at a young age, Heaney has confessed that Latin became a kind of a ratified sacred tongue for him (Hardwick 2016: 1). By the same token, Heaney's work as a translator of Latin surfaces as a less thorny task than his struggle with the ancient Greeks. His most straightforward association with Latin is his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* VI, narrating Aeneas' journey to the underworld where the hero meets the ghost of his father Anchises passing on him a prophetic vision about the glory that awaits Rome, granted that Aeneas will set foot on shore. This is the last completed work of Heaney before he passed away, published posthumously in 2016.[16]

To revert the discussion back to the Greek texts in question, it is noteworthy that the two Heaneyan adaptations have been renamed, as Heaney did not include the name of their

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[15] "Another telling influence encouraging Heaney to delve into the classics was Ted Hughes, with whom he corresponded regularly throughout the Harvard years. In November 1983, after reading Heaney's rendering of *Buile Suibhne*, Hughes urged him to tackle Sophocles, sending him a translation of *Antigone* as a prompt. In an undated letter a year later, Hughes returned to the subject, speculating about 'what you might make of an *Antigone'*, adding that such a project might 'give you an even bigger release, now you've got such a grip on the nerve of it'. In a reply from 8 October 1984, Heaney confesses to having 'funked Antigone. I couldn't face it without some purchase on the Greek'" (Parker 2016:4).

[16] Allusions to Virgil seem to be a staple of Heaney's work: he chose 'The Golden Bough', a rendering of *Aeneid* VI.98-148, as the incipit of *Seeing Things* (1991). Heaney's fascination with Aeneas' *katabasis* can also be discerned in the sequence of twelve poems entitled 'Route 110', from Heaney's final poetry collection *Human Chain* (2010). Here Heaney combines episodes derived from the sixth book of the *Aeneid* with autobiographical elements. Finally, in *Electric Light*, we see Heaney tackling another Virgilian text, the pastoral *Eclogues*, in three different manners: "a translation of *Eclogue* 9 ('Virgil: Eclogue IX'), a transposition of *Eclogue* 4 to modern Ireland ('Bann Valley Eclogue'), and a poem which juxtaposes the world of the *Eclogues* both with that of Yeats and with that of Heaney himself ('Glanmore Valley Eclogue')" (Harrison 2019: 252) Heaney also tackled Horace: Stephen Harrison informs us about an unpublished translation of *Odes* 3.21 entitled 'To a Wine Jar' that Heaney produced as a member of a Belfast group of young poets, of which Derek Mahon and Michael Longley were also members (*Ibid*. 244-7). However, Heaney's most renowned engagement with Horace is in 'Anything Can Happen', first published in *The Irish Times* on 17 November 2001, and later included in *District and Circle* (2006). It is a poem composed in response to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, reflecting Heaney's reaction to the tragedy.

protagonists in the title of his plays. Thus, *Philoctetes* is transformed to *The Cure at Troy*, and *Antigone* to *The Burial at Thebes*. The respective choice of words like 'Troy' and 'Thebes' – two unmistakable Greek markers – indicates that Heaney may intend for his plays to retain a Greek essence, while, if possible, having a greater appeal to the Irish. Again, interviewed by Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney explains:

> We were going to be touring *Philoctetes* to audiences who wouldn't have much historical sense of the play… so I believed a new title could work as a pointer, a kind of subliminal orientation. And this led to *The Cure at Troy*, since in Ireland, north and south, the idea of a miraculous cure is deeply lodged in the religious subculture, whether it involved faith healing or the Lourdes pilgrimage. With *Antigone*, on the other hand, the problem was different: a lot of people were going to be overfamiliar with that play rather than underfamiliar, so I was glad when the phrase *The Burial at Thebes* came to mind, quite early on in the process. The word 'burial' pointed directly to one big anthropological concern that's central to the action, and the whole title was a nice parallel to *The Cure at Troy*. (*Ibid*. 422)

Heaney directly addresses the anticipated Irish audience when it comes to naming his plays. Assuming that they are either too familiar or unfamiliar with the subject matter of the two tragedies, he provides a clear explanation for his choice to rename them. Heaney argues that the strategic introduction of keywords such as 'Cure' and 'Burial' is a well-thought out tactic, since it brings the two Greek plays closer to an understated communal experience. Both words ring a bell with an Irish audience, and by incorporating them in the titles of the plays, they do render visible the sought Irishness of the two versions. Here, one must consider the fact that Heaney acknowledges a conceptual parallelism between the two chosen titles, something that in turn urges one to investigate closer the presumed affinity between the two plays.

Hence, one is invited to look for possible threads of communication between the two plays. *The Cure at Troy* is a Northern Irish version of *Philoctetes* produced at the apex of the Troubles by a regional theatre company with a rigid political agenda like Field Day, whereas *The Burial at Thebes* is a version of *Antigone* emerging from the South, within a post-Troubles landscape, commissioned by the Abbey, Ireland's most traditional theatre organization. While the two adaptations share a common Greek ancestry, they have been culturally transposed into two seemingly different epochs, if not Irelands. Perhaps, a comprehensive analysis of the content of both plays, coupled with an assessment of the distinct political contexts that inspired these adaptations, and a consideration of the varied sociocultural environments, could reveal the complete politics of Heaney's reception of Greek tragedy, along with its aims and objectives. In essence, the subsequent investigation of *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes* revolves around the following question: If the Irish zeitgeist has changed significantly over time, does

Heaney's engagement with the Greeks evolve accordingly, or is there a programmatic continuity in his discourse with them?

To answer this question, I will present and discuss the two plays jointly, as part of a single chapter. This approach can be effectively captured through a set of key issues: first, why 'Cure' and 'Burial' are designated as two Irish signifiers? Second, in what manner these notions are integrated into the Irish collective memory? Third, is there sufficient stylistic evidence within the corresponding theatrical texts, along with extratextual testimonies, to assert that the action of the two plays unfolds in Ireland? In other words, does Heaney's interaction with Sophocles ultimately create the space for the two adaptations to be thoroughly imbued with Irish significance?

These concerns will be central to both subsequent chapter subdivisions. Philoctetes' adamant refusal to accept the possibility of a cure for his leg wound and Antigone's immovable firmness to carry out the prohibited burial of her brother will be examined through the lens of Heaney's skillset and sensibility.

The Cure at Troy: Philoctetes Marooned in the Fifth Province

A Tragedy of Many Tales: Looking at Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Heaney was not familiar with Greek. Therefore, he developed the script for *The Cure at Troy* by "relying on three translations – a late-nineteenth-century version, a Loeb Classical Library text translated by Francis Storr (1912), and a modern translation by David Grene (1957)" (Parker 2016: 3). Overall, Heaney remains largely faithful to the storyline of *Philoctetes*, following the incidents narrated by Sophocles without major departures from the Greek text. As Heaney explains: "I worked line by line, in blank verse – except for the choruses, and a couple of prose paragraphs for a change of pitch" (O'Driscoll 2008: 420). These are the only instances where Heaney deviates significantly from the ancient text.

However, it should be noted that there is no specific stylistic correspondence between the earlier English translations of *Philoctetes* and Heaney's version. Heaney may consult the above translations in terms of plot, but the outcome of *The Cure at Troy* is quite distinct. In the following passage, Heaney elucidates why he considers his version of *Antigone* different from previous English translations of the tragedy. This observation holds true for his adaptation of *Philoctetes* as well:

> Jebb, for example, and E.F. Watling, who did the old Penguin translations of the Theban plays, were under an obligation to render the Greek correctly. They had a scholarly discipline to obey. I, on the other hand, did want to give the substance of the meaning, but my first consideration was speakability. I also wanted different registers, in the musical sense, for different characters and movements in the play. You could say mine is a parallel text. (2004c)

In *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney sticks to the development of *Philoctetes* as indicated by the translators preceding him. Simultaneously, Heaney takes the liberty to retell the play using a more flexible or 'speakable', as he frames it, language.

The only two significant instances where Heaney diverges from the Sophoclean precursor are situated at the very beginning and at the end of the play. Heaney adds a choral ode preceding the moment that the action normally starts in Sophocles (*prologos*), whereas towards the end (*exodos*), he includes another choral ode and extends the final choral song by ten lines. Moreover, the characters of the two plays are almost identical, with the slight variation that Heaney has reduced the number of the actors comprising the Chorus of Neoptolemus' sailors from the traditional twelve to three, besides changing their sex from male to female. Heaney has also made

one of the three actors of the Chorus to speak as Hercules,[17] a distinct character in Sophocles' original fulfilling the *deus ex machina* role.[18] These subtractions, modifications, and additions are critical to the apparent transposition of the tragedy into a contemporary setting and the conveying of a particular Northern Irish sentiment, and they will be thoroughly discussed. Before that, however, a synopsis of the Philoctetes story must be given.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes* unfolds during the ninth year of the Trojan war. With Troy still unconquered and hope waning after Achilles' death, the Greeks undertake a night raid. They capture Helenus, a Trojan seer. Helenus predicts that Troy will remain impregnable unless Philoctetes, armed with his bow gifted by Hercules,[19] joins the expedition and kills Paris. The bow holds a magical history: Philoctetes, by setting Hercules' funeral pyre ablaze, earned the hero's gratitude, receiving the powerful weapon in return. The main obstacle to Helenus' prophecy is Philoctetes' strained relationship with the Greeks. Originally meant to fight in Troy, he was abandoned by the Greek army on Lemnos due to a leg wound caused by a snake bite.[20] Overwhelmed by the foul odour of the wound, Odysseus, with the agreement of Agamemnon and Menelaus, orchestrated his abandonment on the deserted island. Having endured years of solitude, Philoctetes harbours a deep-seated bitterness towards the Greeks. Expectedly, he is a

[17] Heaney chooses the Latin equivalent of the Greek Heracles. For matters of cohesion, I will stick to the same variation.

[18] As Heaney clarified in the programme note of the play: "I attempted to present the conclusion as the inevitable culmination of an honestly endured spiritual and psychological crisis rather than as the result of a supernatural intervention" (1990b). Richard Jones adds: "the theatrical device of giving Hercules' lines to the Chorus Leader provides a visual reinforcement of the idea that Philoctetes had come to his own conclusions: the physical representation of Hercules' character, and by extension his words, were always already present in Philoctetes' world (1997: 241).

[19] In addition to Helenus' prophecy mentioned in the Sophoclean tragedy (*Phil*. 1337-45), according to Pseudo-Apollodorus, there is also a second prophecy made by Calchas that Troy could not be captured without Hercules' bow and arrows fighting on the Greek side (*Epit*. 5.8).

[20] The myth has it that Philoctetes was injured in Chryse, an islet near Lemnos taking its name from the nymph Chryse. Philoctetes was bitten by the snake that protected the altar of the nymph, probably when he approached the site to make libations. In Sophocles' tragedy, Neoptolemus explains to Philoctetes the source of his torture: "You suffer from this severe pain because it was god-sent, since you drew near the guardian of Chryse, the snake that secretly keeps a vigilant watch over her roofless sanctuary" (*σὺ γὰρ νοσεῖς τόδ᾽ ἄλγος ἐκ θείας τύχης, Χρύσης πελασθεὶς φύλακος, ὃς τὸν ἀκαλυφῆ σηκὸν φυλάσσει κρύφιος οἰκουρῶν ὄφις*) (*Phil*. 1326-8). Pausanias also makes mention of Chryse, arguing that the islet has now disappeared in the depths of the sea (*Paus*. 8.33.4.). Additionally, the Latin author Hyginus slightly variates the episode, claiming that the snake was sent by Juno, as she got angry with Philoctetes for lighting Hercules' funeral pyre (*Fab. 102*). Finally, Servius, the Latin grammarian, provides a totally different account of Philoctetes' injury, claiming that Philoctetes had promised Hercules never to disclose where his human remains were to be found, but being pressured by the Greeks, he indicated with his foot the gravesite, thinking that this way he still remained true to his oath. However, while in Troy, Philoctetes got injured by his own arrow, which pierced him in the same foot with which he had designated Hercules' grave (*Serv*. 3.402).

character consumed by self-pity.[21] In anticipation of complications, the Greeks dispatch Odysseus and Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, to capture Philoctetes and his bow.

Sophocles' tragedy begins with the two men arriving at Lemnos. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that Philoctetes will not come to Troy if he recognizes him. Neoptolemus must go alone and deceive Philoctetes, claiming to be on his way to Scyros, expressing disgust at the Greeks. This is the moment when Neoptolemus must propose to Philoctetes that he accompanies him. Odysseus argues that Philoctetes will be willing to return home, unaware that the ship is headed straight to Troy. Neoptolemus reluctantly agrees to Odysseus' scheme. He encounters Philoctetes, who appears unwell but welcomes him warmly. Indeed, Philoctetes pleads to be taken home to Malis. Neoptolemus seizes the bow and waits Philoctetes to prepare for the journey. Suddenly, Philoctetes is gripped by excruciating pains, and blood oozes from his wound. Distraught by the spectacle, Neoptolemus faces a moral dilemma: pity Philoctetes and fail the Greek army, or adhere to Odysseus' plan and betray the friendship Philoctetes feels for him. When Philoctetes regains consciousness, Neoptolemus opts to disclose their true destination, hoping for understanding. Philoctetes erupts in anger and insists on retrieving his bow, a request that Neoptolemus denies.

Sensing the danger, Odysseus reappears, and a quarrel ensues between him and Philoctetes. Going against Helenus' prophecy, Odysseus declares that Philoctetes is not needed, heading to the ship. Neoptolemus orders his sailors to stay with Philoctetes while preparing the boat. As they talk, Philoctetes continues portraying himself as helpless, while the Chorus urges him to stop being stubborn. Odysseus and Neoptolemus return, with Neoptolemus now breaking free of Odysseus' influence. Neoptolemus returns the bow to Philoctetes, inviting him to follow them willingly to Troy. Philoctetes, unmoved, asks Neoptolemus to keep his promise of taking him home. The three characters are trapped in a vicious circle, unable to find a satisfying solution. Finally, the ghost of Hercules descends solving the issue: Hercules commands Philoctetes to go to Troy, assuring him that Asclepius will cure his wound there. Philoctetes, moved by Hercules' instructions, finally agrees. The tragedy ends with an emotional Philoctetes bidding farewell to Lemnos.[22]

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[21] Srila Nayak looks at Shakespeare's *Tempest* to give a matching character: "Philoctetes is the Sophoclean version of Caliban, an outcast from society suffering from the curse of an incurable, foul-smelling wound, living a brutish life on the desolate island of Lemnos" (2014: 119).

[22] A startling aspect of *Philoctetes* is that the death toll is zero; something bizarre for a Greek tragedy. *Philoctetes* is also the only surviving play that has no female characters. These are two uncommon traits that set *Philoctetes* apart from the rest. As Oliver Taplin states: "It is often said (quite wrongly) that 'nothing happens' in *Philoctetes*: it is true that there is no death, no cataclysmic violence—some say that it is not really a tragedy at all" (2004: 148). Correspondingly, Joe Park Poe, in his comprehensive philological treatment of *Philoctetes*, stresses the singularity of this tragedy's subject matter: "I have chosen to write about *Philoctetes* because, perhaps more than any other of Sophocles' plays except *Oedipus at Colonus*, it

After providing a detailed account of the Sophoclean tragedy, one can reflect on what the story of Philoctetes has come to represent. P. E. Easterling outlines the primary themes in binary terms: "alienation and communication, ends and means" (1978: 27). Starting with the second pair, it refers to the acceptable range of human agency; namely what should be the limit in the measures taken to achieve a certain goal, collective or personal. Do the ends always justify the means or are the events narrated in *Philoctetes* a vivid proof of how harmful this way of thinking is? As such, sincerity and opportunism, "the conflict between personal integrity and political expediency, between the conscience of the individual and the call of the tribe" (Parker 2016:3), embodied by Neoptolemus and Odysseus respectively, are two competing forces in the Sophoclean tragedy.

Regarding alienation *versus* communication, this theme underscores the symbolic significance of Philoctetes' estrangement from the rest of the Greeks. Injured and marooned on an island, ostracized from the community he once belonged to, Philoctetes' identity has been shaped by those events. Philoctetes is characterized by a mix of isolation, resentment, and self-pity. To preserve his wounded ego, he feels compelled to internalize his alienation from the community as an integral part of who he is. When the community recognizes Philoctetes' indispensability and decides to reconnect, his instinctive reaction is to refuse any overtures of reconciliation. His existing wound takes precedence, overshadowing any prospects of remedy.[23] Having completely embraced suffering and banishment as the enduring elements of his existence, Philoctetes regards change as a more formidable danger than his present situation. Philoctetes's subject position "illustrates the ways in which the trope of victimhood serves to both consume and define his identity" (McGuire 2019: 21). Consequently, Philoctetes' fixation on his wound, coupled with his steadfast rejection of a better future, delineates his uncompromising demeanour: "Your wound is what you feed on, Philoctetes" (*CT*: 61), utters the Chorus summarizing Philoctetes' *raison d'être*.

Referring back to Heaney, the Irish poet discerned a point of correspondence between Philoctetes' immovable stance and the political impasse in Northern Ireland: "Sullen, rancorous, inwardly gnawed by hatred and paralyzed by memories of past injustice, Philoctetes is Heaney's unlovely image of the sectarian North of Ireland" (Eagleton 1998: 374). So, by "domesticating

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seems on the surface to be affirmative and idealistic, even optimistic" (1974: 6). As argued next, it is this aura of optimism that drew Heaney to stage an adaptation of *Philoctetes* in Northern Ireland.

[23] According to the programme note of *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney sketches Philoctetes as a hero who "suffers a division in himself between a sense of personal grievance and an inner command (which he keeps repressing) to comprehend his own experience, however painful, in the light of a more generous, less self-centred vision" (1990b). Also, in a private letter to Marianne McDonald, Heaney expounds his attraction to Philoctetes in terms of "a fascination with the conflict between the integrity of the personal bond and the exactions of the group's demands for loyalty. A sense that the pride in the wound is stronger than the desire for a cure. A sympathy with that reluctance to shed the haughtiness of the hurt spirit for the humdrum and *caritas* of renewal. The intoxication of defiance over the civic, sober path of adjustment" (1996: 137).

Sophocles and making the wound of Philoctetes emblematic of the trauma of Ulster's maimed and distrustful communities" (Croty 2001: 204), Heaney developed an inventive way to address the Troubles. Commenting on the disposition of Philoctetes, and how he precisely interprets it in relation to the Troubles, Heaney argues:

> He is first and foremost a character in the Greek play, himself alone with his predicament, just as he is also an aspect of *every* intransigence, republican as well as Unionist, a manifestation of the swank of victimhood, the righteous refusal, the wounded one whose identity has become dependent upon the wound, the betrayed one whose energy and pride is a morbid symptom. (2002: 175)

Heaney establishes a connection between Philoctetes' portrayal by Sophocles and the realities of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Specifically, Heaney interprets Philoctetes' predicament as paradigmatic of the deadlock in his country, acknowledging clear parallels "between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland" (*Ibid*.).[24]

For instance, in the following lines from *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes' preference of pain over the fear of the unknown, could also be read as a commentary of the Northern Irish situation:

> The past is bearable,
> The past's only a scar, but the future –
> Never. (*CT*: 73)

Philoctetes' statements in the play often carry a dual significance, hinting at the Troubles. However, this is not to say that Heaney uses the Philoctetes story to back up a specific party agenda:

> Anyone looking to Heaney for some *parti pris*, coded political stance of a sectional nature will be disappointed. The analogy works rather in the more generalised terms of division, resentment and a sense of grievance or injustice - plus the possible cessation of these for the greater good. The play is beyond any sectional pleading of a case in this respect. (Peacock 1992: 243)

Conceivably then, a major incentive for Heaney to adapt *Philoctetes* must have been the conspicuously promising ending of the tragedy, represented by Philoctetes' atonement. As McDonald argues: "The history of the Trojan War differs from the history of Ireland, but they meet

[24] Hugh Denard elaborates: "Heaney's work boldly opened up a dialogue between its Sophoclean model and the culture and politics of Northern Ireland. To the Sophoclean representation of a wounded, embittered Philoctetes, Heaney brought the experience of suffering in Northern Ireland. To the Northern Irish crisis, the Sophoclean model brought a vision of miraculous redemption" (2000: 2).

symbolically in this story of Philoctetes' wound… Heaney is in favour of a cure, or healing, and he uses Greek tragedy to distance and yet make familiar the major issues of conflict" (McDonald 1996: 133). Based on this observation, a third antithetical pairing surfaces, that of 'wound *versus* cure'. The wound is what Philoctetes – and by extension Northern Ireland – suffer from, whereas the cure is what both urgently need.[25]

Heaney quickly sensed that Philoctetes' central message "was familiar to people on both sides of the political fence in Northern Ireland. People living in a situation where to speak freely and truly on certain occasions would be regarded as letting down the side" (O'Driscoll 2008: 420). Moreover, Heaney acknowledged in *Philoctetes* an allegory that not only reflected the prevailing situation in Northern Ireland at that time but also provided a symbolic resolution to the violent stalemate. By transposing the Philoctetean thematics to a Northern Irish context, Heaney becomes "an *iconographer* of reconciliation" (Wallace 2015: 9). Minding also that "the reading of the play to which an audience is directed is that political reconciliation is an available and viable alternative to the nursing of a 'wound'" (Richards 1995: 82). In this way, Heaney's adaptation becomes a powerful vehicle for exploring and advocating for resolution in the Northern Irish context.

To elaborate further, in the following section, *The Cure at Troy* will be juxtaposed against the turbulent political climate of the epoch as well as the intricate cultural network from which the play originated.

[25] The imagery of the wounded body and the political associations it engenders, transpires also in Heaney's poetry. In 'At Potato Digging' from *Death of a Naturalist*, Heaney divulges that "where potato diggers are | you still smell the running sore", whereas in 'Act of Union' from *North*, a pessimistic Heaney suggests that "No treaty | I foresee will salve completely your tracked | And stretchmarked body, the big pain | That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again".

Inside Derry City Walls: The Troubles and the Workings of the Field Day Theatre Company

As previously noted, *The Cure at Troy* was originally staged at the Guildhall in Derry. Based on this information, two things stand out: first the choice of Guildhall, which, as its name suggests, is not a traditional theatre building but an administrative centre. Second, the choice of Derry, which, besides being the city with the largest Catholic representation in the predominantly Protestant Northern Ireland, it is also linked with a name dispute that came to represent the sectarian division in Northern Ireland. What is more remarkable, however, is that the stories of Guildhall and Derry are somewhat related.

Derry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland, is like a ground zero for the political and cultural divide in the area, as since its formation as a colonial settlement, Derry has always been a particularly symbolic contested space. Situated on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Derry is a place with disputed nomenclature, referred to as Londonderry by the Protestant community. Thereby, Derry/Londonderry is a semantically as well as culturally divided city expressing "in its very location and in its two names the split and doubled identities that are to be found in Northern Ireland, and [reflecting] the enmeshed consciousness within both communities of simultaneously belonging and isolation" (O'Malley 2011: 17).

As for Guildhall, built in 1887 and located just outside the Derry city walls, it was financed by the Irish Society, originally a consortium of traders and manufacturers (known also as Liver Companies) of the City of London. Guildhall came to replace the previous 17th-century town hall called Market House that stood in the centre of the old city but got destroyed during the Siege of Derry in 1689. For the biggest part of the 20th century, Guildhall's main function was to serve as the meeting place of the Londonderry borough. On 12 June 1972, almost half a year after Bloody Sunday, Guildhall was bombed by members of the Provisional I.R.A. As such, due to its history, sponsors, and function as city hall, Guildhall was largely considered a Unionist landmark in the area, reminiscent of the first Protestant settlers in Ulster. Therefore, despite its rather misleading name, the operations of the Irish Society had left an irrefutable British imprint on the nomenclature and political life of Derry, something that became more evident centuries later, once the sectarian division broke out in the late 1960s.

Derry, arguably the most affected city in Northern Ireland by the Troubles, witnessed one of the early significant events of the thirty-year conflict. In August 1969, the Battle of the Bogside unfolded—a three-day communal riot between Catholic residents and the Royal Ulster Constabulary police forces. Triggered by the provocative annual march of the Protestant Apprentice Boys commemorating the city's defence against Jacobite forces, this particular parade reached the predominantly Catholic Bogside area, sparking an enraged reaction from residents

and leading to police intervention and ensuing chaos. Obviously, Derry is also infamous for the Bloody Sunday massacre on 30 January 1972, where British paratroopers shot and killed fourteen unarmed civilians protesting the internment without trial of several hundred Catholics suspected of IRA ties. Following the atrocity, Heaney quit his lecturer position at Queen's University in Belfast and permanently relocated from Bellaghy, Co Derry, to Glanmore, Co Wicklow in the Republic.[26]

Overall, during the 1960s, an unusual political phenomenon emerged in Derry. Despite a Catholic and Nationalist majority in the city, gerrymandering resulted in most elected members of the Londonderry Corporation aligning with Unionism. This anomaly immediately impacted job and housing opportunities for Catholics, leaving them largely disenfranchised. Naturally, "The long status of Northern Ireland Catholics as second-class citizens… brought an endless suppuration of Catholics statements of grievance" (Dudley Edwards 1997: 47). Despite non-sectarian and ostensibly peaceful civil rights marches addressing inequality and discrimination faced by Catholic residents, the subsequent years saw an escalation of violent sectarian conflict. Republican and Loyalist paramilitary attacks spread throughout Northern Ireland, transforming what began as a local Derry issue into an armed dispute over governance in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the Troubles, both Protestant and Catholic communities in Derry harbored a so-called siege mentality. This shared perception led both groups to feel constantly threatened and under attack by the other, fostering sentiments of victimization and defensiveness. Both sides were inclined to "parade their isolation and suffering as badges of honor" (Rankin Russell 2014: 289), with the Protestant community doing so more literally, considering the Apprentice Boys' parade. The origins of this siege mentality trace back to the historic Siege of Derry, historically linked with the Protestant heritage of the city. However, Marilyn Richtarik notes that an atmosphere of confinement also loomed over the Catholic consciousness:

> For unionists, Derry, which withstood a lengthy siege by James II in 1689 to make possible the continuation of Protestant rule, is a symbol of their determination to remain British. For nationalists, who constitute a majority in Derry but a minority in the North as a whole, the gerrymandering that kept a protestant minority in power in the city stands out as one of the most egregious of the official and legal discrimination practiced against Catholics in Northern Ireland. (1995: 13)

[26] In 'Exposure', the concluding poem of *North*, Heaney laments for being forced to become an internal exile: "I am neither internee nor informer; | An inner ŕmigrŕ, grown long-haired | And thoughtful; a wood-kerne | Escaped from the massacre". In 'Casualty', published in *Field Work* (1979), Heaney mourns the loss of his dear fisherman friend Louis O'Neill, who, on the Wednesday after Bloody Sunday, and in defiance of the imposed curfew, died while drinking in a pub, as a result of a bomb attack: "He was blown to bits | Out drinking in a curfew | Others obeyed, three nights | After they shot dead | The thirteen men in Derry".

Isolation and marginalization are two notions that both conflicting communities identify with. Intriguingly, this circumstance has been tackled by Heaney, using a Greek equivalent. In 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' from *North*, Heaney, speaking from the perspective of a disentangled Catholic, deftly presents how the Catholic minority perceives its existence in the North: "Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks, | Besieged within the siege, whispering morse". In introducing this Homeric imagery of the Greeks inside the Trojan horse, Heaney showcases how the prevalent Protestant siege mentality, inevitably affects the Catholic sense of self. Allegedly ensnared by each other, both Catholic and Protestant residents of Derry perceive the other's existence as inherently stifling and unwelcome. By the same token, in *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes' wails about his isolation in Lemnos suggesting that "This island is a nowhere" (*CT*: 18), speaking of "a home where I never was at home" (*Ibid*. 29), and also mentioning that "No matter how I'm besieged. | I'll be my own Troy" (*Ibid*. 63). Such lamentations could aptly describe the consequences of the mutually exclusive coexistence of Protestants and Catholics in Derry.

Considering now that *The Cure at Troy* was produced in 1990, more than twenty years since the beginning of the Troubles, the respective choice of Derry and Guildhall by the Field Day Theatre Company as the location and venue for the premier of *The Cure at Troy* was immensely symbolic. In fact, *The Cure at Troy* was not the first play to be staged at the Guildhall. Starting with Brian Friel's *Translations*[27] in 1980, all Field Day productions used the Guildhall as a starting point, before touring all Ireland bringing its dramas "to large and small towns throughout the island, playing in local theatres and other community venues, often before audiences that had limited access to professional theatre" (O'Malley 2011: 5).[28] On that note, Carmen Szabo comments:

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[27] Lorna Hardwick makes an intriguing connection between Friel's *Translations*, Heaney's reception of Sophocles, Irish resistance to British colonialism, and the overall significance of Classics in Ireland: "The descendants of the Trojans, the Romans, were also regarded as agents through which the Irish might use classical culture to resist colonial domination. This tradition was drawn on by Brian Friel in his play *Translations*… Friel's play explored the impact on the rural Ireland of the 1830s of the Ordnance Survey that substituted English place names for Irish. It also explored the effects of the national schools that imposed English-medium education on all Irish children. The play highlighted the resistance of the hedge-school tradition and also illuminated the potential of Latin, and especially Vergil, as a cultural bridge between opposing groups who could not otherwise understand one another linguistically or culturally… Thus Seamus Heaney's classical work is situated in a classical tradition that is unique to Ireland, derived from and associated with an early interplay in Irish cultural history between the classical and the indigenous. This interplay constantly subverted any attempts by the English to use classical culture as a means of embedding Ascendancy domination. It meant that the Irish classical tradition could use Greek and Roman texts as allegories for political debate without fatal association with the colonizers" (2007b: 315).

[28] Anthony Roche explains further: "From their Derry base, the Company toured their annual productions around Northern and Southern Ireland, setting an influential pattern for cross-border cultural activity. They also made a frontal assault on London theatre. *Translations* was the first Irish play to enter the repertoire of the British National Theatre" (2009: 179).

> The Guildhall, a bleak, Victorian building… embodies the essence of the oppressive colonial structures, containing the Mayor's parlour and the offices of the city council. By entering the space of power and using it as starting point for their tours, Field Day not only re-enhanced their political status but, in time, they reacted against the cultural *status quo* enjoyed at that point by Belfast and Dublin… Thus, Field Day, began their fifteen-year journey as a theatre company which, if it still wanted to establish a new national theatre for the North, advocated a complete severing of the links with a romantic theatrical past, represented in part by W. B. Yeats's Abbey Theatre and by the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. (2007: 8)

Szabo's remarks disclose that any comprehensive analysis of *The Cure at Troy* cannot omit referring to the workings of Field Day, its ideological apparatus and artistic vision. Speaking of which, Heaney concretizes the Field Day mission: "We could create a space in which we could try to redefine what being Irish meant in the context of what had happened in the North, the relationship of Irish nationalism and culture" (Walsh 1990). Accordingly, Heaney's adoption of Philoctetean themes will not be explored in isolation, but as a pivotal moment in a broader Northern Irish cultural endeavour.

Field Day is a far cry from any conventional theatre company, as its practices were never solely limited to theatre-making. That is, apart from an annual theatrical production, Field Day oversaw "the publication of five sets of pamphlets on various aspects of Irish culture, a series of monographs and essay collections… and the massive *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*" (Richtarik 2004: 194).[29] This rather ambitious and multifaceted initiative was instigated by the director Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea.[30] Soon, four more literati would join the board of directors, viz. the poets Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin, the scholar Seamus Deane, and David Hammond, a filmmaker and musician. The board consisted of three Catholics and three

[29] The *Anthology* includes examples of Irish writing from 550 CE to the late 20th century. As for the pamphlets, they tackle issues "on language, myth, law and the interrelation of literature and colonialism, all with specific reference to the Ireland-England question" (Murray 1997: 208). Heaney's pamphlet contribution, entitled 'An Open Letter', is a verse response to the editors of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), who had wrongly included poems by Heaney in the volume. Protesting to his classification as a British poet, Heaney decided to offer a serio-comic poetic response, explaining to the editors the distinction between Britannia and Hibernia. With the most explicit and oft-quoted lines of the poem being: "My passport's green | No glass of ours was ever raised | To toast *The Queen"*.

[30] There are two explanations behind the name of 'Field Day'. The first, that is a witty amalgam of 'Friel' and 'Deane' (Murray 1997: 208). The second, included in the programme note of *Translations*, is the lexical entry from the OED: "A day on which troops are drawn up for exercise in field evolution; a military review; a day occupied with brilliant or exciting events; a day spent in the field, e.g. by the hunt, or by field naturalists". Stephen Regan makes an alluring remark about the second explanation: "The field, it would seem, is a place of conflicting pursuits, and while being subject to military occupation it is also available for more natural or leisurely pastimes: it is simultaneously a place of violence and conservation" (1992: 27).

Protestants, all from Northern Ireland. Later, the playwright Thomas Kilroy became the only member from the Republic of Ireland, serving as the board's sole southern representative.

This harmonious balance between the directors, representing equally the two dominant religious groups in Northern Ireland, had its purpose. Although Field Day was often accused of being a 'green activity',[31] its professed primary objective was to contribute to the overcoming of the sectarian division in Northern Ireland, in an attempt to think *otherwise* in relation to the Troubles. According to Heaney:

> We could create a space in which we could try to redefine what being Irish meant in the context of what had happened in the North, the relationship of Irish nationalism and culture. We were very conscious that we wanted to be quite independent of the British influence exercised through Belfast and the equally strong cultural hegemony of Dublin. (qtd in Taplin 2004: 161)

This is a cultural group with a "stated intention of subjecting the political crisis in the North and its reverberation in the Republic to a necessary and urgent reappraisal" (Richards 2003: 62). Field Day's interventionist agenda is succinctly conveyed by the directors' collectively sanctioned statement, which declares that "Field Day could and should contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation" (Deane et al. 1985: vii).

The Field Day executives intended to dismantle outdated and ineffective approaches to addressing the conflict by formulating a new discourse on Northern Ireland. Essentially, Field Day sought to enable the conflict's protagonists to communicate directly. This endeavour underscored the necessity for a new language of reconciliation, with the belief that the linguistic aspect could potentially break the political deadlock in Northern Ireland. Brian Friel's comment aligns with this direction: "I think that the political problem of this island is going to be solved by language, and that the linguistic overhaul will lead to a cultural state, not a political one, but out of that cultural state, the possibility of a political state follows" (McGrath 1987: 148).

With its nuanced and multivalent interventions in the Northern Irish cultural proceedings, Field Day envisaged to bring forward a new means of communication, "finding or creating a space between unionism and nationalism and proving by example the possibility of a shared culture in the North of Ireland" (Richtarik 1995: 7). Michael Etherton extrapolates on this:

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[31] The literary critic Edna Longley has been one of Field Day's fiercest and longstanding critics, repeatedly accusing the company for "unreconstructed nationalism" (Richtarik 2004: 201) and for "throw[ing] theory at Ireland, hoping that bits of it will stick" (Longley 1985: 28). Also, Colm Tóibín has stated that "there were times in the 1980s when it was hard not to feel that Field Day had become the literary wing of the IRA" (1995: 10).

> The Field Day writers see the problem in linguistic terms. In their view, the conflict is expressed in the arid rhetoric of Loyalist and Republican sympathizers. The physical brutality and the impending annihilation of communities is matched by an increasingly debased language of critical perception and commentary. There is now a perceived need to try to define such goals as freedom, justice, and independence within a revitalized cultural discourse… Put simply, the Field Day Theatre Company wants to revitalize Irish literature and criticism by finding completely new ways of talking about the problems of Ireland. (1987: 65)

Field Day was programmatically endorsing the articulation of a new theatrical language to ponder on the detrimental effects of sectarian division, thus undermining the restrictive binary structures hitherto dominating the Irish critical discourse.

Considering now how ideologically disparate was the original audience of *Translations* to attend the first ever Field Day performance, it suffices to grasp the conciliatory *modus operandi* of the theatrical company:

> The first night in the Guildhall saw a complete political spectrum of Northern Ireland - from Sinn Fein and the SDLP on the Catholic side through Unionists of various shades on the other - sharing the same space and anticipating by several decades what was out in place by the power-sharing Executive.[32] (Roche 2009: 179)

At the other end, when the group took a hiatus in 1993, Brian Friel summarized the whole Field Day initiative by suggesting that the project was founded "to create an opportunity for 'talking amongst ourselves', others can listen if they wish" (Hadfield 1993: 47). Here, it is also worthwhile to mention Eamon Hughes' words about Field Day's cultural input suggesting that "theatre in Ireland, after several decades of introspective provincialism, characterized by Douglas Kennedy as 'talking to itself', was beginning to emerge once again as a theatre which was worth attending to" (1990: 68-9).

Friel's call for "talking amongst ourselves" signifies a paradigm shift in Northern Irish affairs, emphasizing the need for dialogue among those most deprived of it. However, to arrive at this realization, the Field Day intelligentsia first had to acknowledge the limitations of the existing stalemate. Seamus Deane explains in more detail:

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[32] In the same light, Derek West, reviewing the premier of *The Cure at Troy*, reads the play as an abrupt attempt to transcend the sectarian nature of the conflict: "One look around the Guildhall was enough to confirm my suspicions that the gang would all be there - sharpening their quills and watching for the first clear evidence that Lemnos was Ireland, that Philoctetes was in the DUP and that Field Day was nothing more than etc etc. But it was all too subtle for that. The themes were clear enough - but any attempt to plant Heaney's adaptation square onto one or other version of the Irish situation simply would not work" (1990: 12).

> The major communities in the North, Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist, are compelled by the force of circumstances… to rehearse positions from which there is no exit... Each community sees the other as a threat to its existence. Each regards itself as, at one and the same time, the preserver of basic principle, caricatured by its erstwhile allies and friends into a blind and benighted tribe. Both communities are trapped within a tight geographic space, within a stifling set of stereotypes, half-persuaded that they are an embarrassment to the nation-states that cooperate to govern them. Even the usual vocabulary of democratic discourse fails to operate successfully. (1990: 15-16)

From Deane's words, one fathoms that for the directors of Field Day, their project signified a rupture with the established approaches on the Northern Irish question. To do so, Field Day constructed its policy on the basis of an equivocal concept, that of the 'fifth province'. Before delving into details about the origins and the various clarifications of the 'fifth province', it is important to stress that all manifestations of the concept are language-bound. As Richard Kearney, the Irish thinker most associated with the concept, argues: "the creation of this fifth province calls for the creation of a new vocabulary, a new mode of communication which will acknowledge, and perhaps, ultimately mediate between the sundered cultural identities of this island" (Kearney 1988: 125).

The earliest mention of the 'fifth province' in the contemporary Irish cultural discourse can be traced to the first volume of *The Crane Bag* published in 1977. According to its editors, Richard Kearney and Mark Hederman, the journal aimed "to supply challenging visions on culture, history, tradition and identity and to fill the gaps between the overused binary oppositions that dominated previous approaches to the cultural discourse in Ireland" (Szabo 2007: 1). With this objective in mind, the two editors accentuated the existence of the 'fifth province', an allegorical space without specific geographical coordinates: "The symbol was taken from a Celtic tradition according to which Ireland was divided into four quarters and a spiritual middle - counterbalancing the political centre of Tara" (Boss 2002: 143). As such, the 'fifth province' was introduced as an icon of primordial spiritual unity, placed above any of the tangible intricacies of the present Irish nation. To quote the exact passage from *The Crane Bag*:

> Although Tara was the political centre of Ireland, this second centre was just as important and acted as a necessary balance. It was a non-political centre. It was sometimes described as a secret well, known only to the druids and the poets. The two centres acted like two kidneys in the body of the land. The balance between the two was essential to peace and harmony in the country. It seems clear to us that in the present unhappy state of our country it is essential to restore this second centre of gravity in some way. The obvious impotence of the political attempts to unite the four political and geographical provinces would seem to indicate another kind of solution, another kind

> of unity, one which would incorporate the 'fifth' province. This province, this place, this centre, is not a political position. In, fact, if it is a position at all, it would be marked by the absence of any particular political and geographical delineation, something more like a dis-position. (Kearney 1977: 4)

Despite the various ambiguities regarding its definition, the emergence of the 'fifth province' seems to come as a response to the political standstill in Ireland, North and South. Through the lens of the 'fifth province', Kearney envisioned a utopian site of concord, where any of the customary conflict endemic to Ireland is totally absent. As such, within the 'fifth province', a new united Irish identity could be negotiated, freed from the obvious complicacies set by history.

Given its distinctive constitution, to access the 'fifth province' requires fine handling. As Kearney underlines: **"**The fifth province can be imagined and reimagined; but it cannot be occupied. In the fifth province, it is always a question of thinking *otherwise*" (Kearney 1997: 81). From this, one understands that the 'fifth province' is a mental state that necessitates a special way of thinking in order to be reached. Hence, according to Hederman, it is only "the artist, and especially the poet [that] can provide us with access to this domain because [it] requires a method and a language which are *sui generis* both to reach it and to describe it" (1985: 11). While somewhat obscure, this statement effectively outlines Heaney's Field Day assignment: to create a play for the Irish stage prompting the audience to think *otherwise* in relation to the Troubles.

To sum up, the 'fifth province' is better perceived as a transcendental region; a liminal space where all man-made oppositions are resolved. Field Day utilized this imaginative realm as the notional bedrock of its artistic practices: "Rather than issue a program or manifesto, the company turned to the 'fifth province' in order to define its objectives" (O'Malley 2007: 302). In this regard, discussing Field Day's employment of the concept as the cornerstone of their policy, Brian Friel asserts that "we appropriated the phrase 'fifth province'… through which we hope to devise another way of looking at Ireland, or another possible Ireland – that first must be articulated, spoken, written, painted, sung but then may be legislated for" (Quilligan 1984). All Field Day's plays must be conjectured as by-products of this aspiration, namely as theatrical interventions that imaginatively forecast what eventually is deemed politically viable. Especially in Heaney's case, it could be argued that the broad reconciliatory tone of *The Cure at Troy* anticipated major institutional changes in Northern Ireland, as typified by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that sealed the end of the Troubles.

In the following section, a close reading of *The Cure at Troy* will methodically examine how Heaney's adaptation of Sophocles *Philoctetes* is conflated with topical references to Northern Ireland.

'Between the You and the Me and the It of It': Heaney's Handling of the Chorus

A close reading of *The Cure at Troy* should begin with the distinct introductory approach adopted by Heaney. Unlike Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, where Odysseus is the first to speak, announcing that "this is the coast of the seagirt island of Lemnos" (*ἀκτὴ μὲν ἥδε τῆς περιῤῥύτου χθονὸς Λήμνου*) (*Phil.* 1-2), Heaney inserts an additional passage, namely an inaugural choral ode to make clear what is thematically at stake in *The Cure at Troy*.[33] Specifically, Heaney demarcates the prevalent atmosphere of his play, set in a terrain of endless discord and conflict. As such, before introducing his characters and delving into the particularities of the play, Heaney delivers a vignette of what is to be expected in *The Cure at Troy*. The overall sentiment that transpires from the initial choral ode is that of collective and compulsive suffering, of a traumatic circumstance with no seeming way out, giving rise to the idea that the expressed pain oozing from Philoctetes' wound is not strictly personal, but pertains to a communal experience of distress and agony.

Significantly, Heaney's poetic 'I' is located in the two choral pieces, one introductory and the other conclusive, which together constitute the greatest departure from the ancient source-text. Heaney utilizes the two extra pieces for the Chorus to communicate his own perspective on the events enacted on stage. By inserting himself into the Greek Chorus, Heaney not only succeeds in contextualizing the action of the play to a Northern Irish setting, but also fashions himself as the proper mediator of the Philoctetean thematics. Following this meta-dramatic technique, "the audience is made aware that, in witnessing a version of a Greek play, they are witnesses also to an individual poet's meditation on the play, and that the dramatic medium is therefore a far from impersonal one" (P. McDonald 1995: 192). As we will see, this strategy renders *The Cure at Troy* contemporaneous to the lived experience of the poet.

In the first choral piece, Heaney declares his intention to speak from the perspective of the poet, emphasizing poetry as the fitting medium to convey the essence of the Sophoclean play to his contemporaries. This includes articulating the central reconciliatory message of the tragedy. Having established poetry's authority, in the second ode Heaney delivers a compelling encomium on the pre-eminence of hope in times of adversity, which in addition to its direct application to Philoctetes' story, could also be read as a call for peace and compromise in Northern Ireland.

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[33] As Paul Turner clarifies about *The Cure at Troy*: "The play begins with a 32-line 'prologue'. This word (*prologos* in Greek) is a technical term in the structure of Greek tragedy for 'the part preceding the entrance of the chorus, a monologue or dialogue which sets out the subject of the drama and the situation from which it starts'. In *Philoctetes* the prologue is the opening dialogue between Odysseus and Neoptolemus (lines 1–134). But Heaney seems to use the term in a generalized modern sense to mean a preface or introduction. His 'prologue', instead of preceding the entrance of the chorus, is actually spoken by his chorus; and instead of setting out the initial dramatic situation, makes general comments on the whole action" (2007: 121).

Naturally, topical references to Northern Ireland are present in both additional passages. In the opening choral ode, Heaney mirrors the relentless violence and uncertainty characteristic of the Troubles. Conversely, in the concluding ode, he imparts an optimistic message, suggesting that the prolonged era of anguish and sorrow can conclude through a collective embrace of hope. The Chorus in *The Cure at Troy,* exhorts, recommends, and warns, without it always being clear whether receiver is the protagonists of the play or the audience. By attesting that the words of the Chorus are the very words of the poet, Heaney subtly conveys a sentiment of immediacy in the occurrences developed on stage, without this to transpire as overtly obvious or at the expense of the *Philoctetes* plot. Accordingly, Helen Eastman underlines "the duality of Heaney's chorus, who are nominally the ancient sailors of the original but use a diction and metaphoric landscape that places the play firmly in Heaney's Ireland; they are meta-textually aware of their own choral role and directly address the audience to discuss it" (2019: 95). So, the functioning of the Chorus is inseparable from its display as the main source of commentary for the Northern Irish affairs of the time as well as Heaney's own reading of those events.

To explore further, it is useful to quote the entire opening ode, preserving its original typography:

Philoctetes.
Hercules.
Odysseus.
Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.
All throwing shapes, every one of them
Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
No matter what.

People so deep into
Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up.
People so staunch and true, they're fixated,
Shinning with self-regard like polished stones.

And their whole life spent admiring themselves
For their own long-suffering.
Licking their wounds
And flashing them around like decorations.
I hate it, I always hated it, and I am
A part of it myself.

And a part of you,
For my part is the chorus, and the chorus
Is more or less a borderline between
The you and the me and the it of it.

Between
The gods' and human beings' sense of things.

And that's the borderline that poetry
Operates on too, always in between
What you would like to happen and what will –
Whether you like it or not.

Poetry
Allowed the god to speak. It was the voice
Of reality and justice. The voice of Hercules
That Philoctetes is going to have to hear
When the stone cracks open and the lava flows.
But we'll come to that.

For now, remember this:
Every time the crater on Lemnos Island
Starts to erupt, what Philoctetes sees
Is a blaze he started years and years ago
Under Hercules's funeral pyre.

The god's mind lights up his mind every time. (*CT*: 1-2)

The ode is organically divided into two distinct parts. The first part ends with the "A part of it myself" line, whereas the second part starts with the "And a part of you" line, coming just after. In the first part, Heaney describes a situation of perpetual terror absorbing everyone in its vortex. The universality of the phenomenon is accentuated by the phrase "Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings", stressing anyone's inability to break free from it, regardless their stature or importance. The Chorus does not constitute an exception to this. Actually, the sentiment that it is Heaney who is behind the Chorus is confirmed by the Chorus' triple use of the personal pronoun 'I' – "I hate it, I always hated it, and I am | A part of it myself" – revealing the poet's loathing and powerlessness. This way, Heaney makes sure that the audience is aware that the Chorus will echo his own thoughts throughout the play. The first section concludes with the impression that a halt

to collective suffering is not feasible due to the deep-seated victimhood and self-righteousness of the involved parties, who end up perceiving their personal plight as the only valid truth.

Having first disclosed the totality of hostility, the second part comprises an attempt to fathom it. The Chorus, acknowledging its reluctant yet inevitable involvement in the vicious circle of pain and hatred, ponders on how to deal with this adverse circumstance. The Chorus concludes that only poetic language can serve to tackle the present unfortunate reality, coupled with a yearning for a better future. In support of this, the Chorus recognizes an innate affinity between the intermediary role that it traditionally occupies and the function of poetry: "Just as the chorus acts as a bridge between audience and action, so poetry occupies a liminal role, posed between hope and what ineluctably is" (Peacock 1992: 242). This leads to the fashioning of poetry, and consequently of the poet, as the *locus* where the play's traumatic scenario can be articulated as well as its resolution can be imagined. As Wallace comments about the ending of *The Cure at Troy*: "it is the spirit of Poetry rather than that of Hercules who ultimately convinces Philoctetes. The Chorus channels Hercules' words to him, but they also channel the voice of Poetry itself" (2015: 104).[34] This has already been foretold in the introductory lines, with the Chorus mentioning that "Poetry | Allowed the god to speak". Therefore, only after designating to poetry the precise role it will play, the Chorus refers to Philoctetes, for its story to be developed on stage.

Moreover, the Chorus names poetry as the voice of "reality and justice", but it also happens to be the voice that Heaney knows best: poetry is literally the *medium* steering Heaney's play to completion. Via the Chorus, Heaney pronounces that he will not do theatre by momentarily removing the poet's mantle, but *as* a poet. By doing theatre *as* a poet, Heaney aims at reflecting his poetic outlook on stage. Central to this is Heaney's understanding of what poetry can accomplish. In fact, the key notion of poetry's in-betweenness, namely "the borderline that poetry | Operates on", is a vital component of the whole Heaneyan poetics. As Heaney expounds in 'The Government of the Tongue':

> In the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. (1988: 108)

[34] Heaney explains further his decision to incorporate the *deus ex machina* in the Chorus: "Hercules' speech at the end (which I transpose to the Chorus) is an expression of recognition which Philoctetes has repressed: in other words, the Chorus is the voice of his unconscious" (2002: 173). The swift from divine to human language is significant, as this way Heaney insinuates that the impending catharsis is man-made, not a result of divine intervention.

Heaney defines poetry as the great mediator between reality and imagination. Reminiscent of Aristotle's *Poetics* that the difference between history and poetry is that the first deals with what has happened, while the latter with what may happen (*ἀλλὰ τούτῳ διαφέρει, τῷ τὸν μὲν τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τὸν δὲ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο*) (*Poet*. 9), Heaney delimits poetry's field of action in-between these two poles. Similarly, the Chorus in *The Cure at Troy* functions always in-between "What you would like to happen and what will – | Whether you like it or not". It is a constant strife between actuality and possibility that best describes poetry's purpose, and consequently the domain that the Chorus inhabits.[35]

Also, in 'The Redress of Poetry', Heaney states that all poets are challenged "to show how poetry's existence as a form of art relates to our existence as citizens of society – how it is 'of present use'… [whereas] poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers' sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable" (1995: 1). This is not to insinuate that the two tasks at hand are mutually exclusive for the poet. Rather, it is Heaney's insistence that poetry's practical use lies in attributing to reality an image of itself that has not yet been realized. Heaney programmatically believes that the utility of poetry is to enrich the present with potential versions of itself. This entails that the poet – to be able to think *otherwise* and *ahead* – possesses a deep awareness of the present world. This is precisely what happens in *The Cure at Troy*: the opening ode describes with brutal candour the present unfavourable situation in which the Chorus finds itself entrapped, whereas, in the conclusive ode, the Chorus moves on to propose an imaginative exodus from it, set in an ideal future. To this end, Neoptolemus' affirmation that "I am going to redress the balance" (*CT*: 65), when he hands the bow back to Philoctetes, can be read as a nod at the "redressing effects of poetry [that] comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances" (Heaney 1995: 4). While not immediately apparent, *The Cure at Troy* consistently draws support from Heaney's theoretical grasp of how poetry operates.

Heaney's cognition of poetry as a middle point between two competing forces seems to be informed by personal experience. In 'Terminus' from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), a poem named after the Roman god of boundaries and borders, Heaney asserts: "Two buckets were easier carried than one | I grew up in between". This typical farmyard practice of balancing one side against the other, a trick that Heaney probably learned as a youngster by his elders, serves as a metaphor for the poet's sought midway position: emphasizing the poet's place between tradition and innovation as well as their responsibility to remain balanced amidst conflicting pressures. Likewise, in 'Flight Path' from *The Spirit Level* (1996), Heaney memorializes an encounter he had

[35] The notion that the Chorus of *The Cure at Troy* is thematically informed by Heaney's theoretical writing on poetry is corroborated by the Chorus' command to Philoctetes that: "You should govern your tongue and present a true case" (CT: 61).

during a train journey, where he was recognized and confronted by a Sinn Féin member over why he does not write poetry that explicitly endorses the Republican cause:

> 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write
> Something for us?' 'If I do write something,
> Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself.'

From these lines, it is easy to grasp the 'us *versus* myself' mindset: as a well-known Catholic from the North, this episode is suggestive of the community's expectations imposed on Heaney as well as Heaney's commitment of keeping his poetic vision intact. Correspondingly, Zirzoti stresses that is "easy to grasp in the Chorus' words an allusion to Heaney's own 'in-betweenness', that is his feeling of occupying a halfway position between the allegiance to his community and the loyalty to his role as a poet" (2014: 132). Hence, Heaney's espousing of the middle ground and his ensuing identification with the Chorus should not be taken as a sign of weakness or disengagement. Instead, it is a consciously chosen standpoint enabling the poet to exhibit a hitherto unfulfilled condition.

By making the Chorus enumerate the powers of poetry, Heaney not only delineates his position as a poet in charge of appropriating a Greek play for the Irish stage, but also hints at the possible parallels between the Philoctetean thematics and the prevalent situation in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, according to Heaney, such undertaking is not single-minded: "The extra speeches for the Chorus… were meant to contextualize the actions, and not just within a discourse that could apply to Northern politics. These two speeches also defend the right of poetry/poetic drama to be something other than 'protest'" (2002: 173). Evidently, Heaney envisioned something more than a mere site-specific condemnation of the Northern Irish *status quo*. As Wallace argues: "With *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney elaborates on the idea of auratic human rights poetry by integrating it into a Greek chorus – and thus a larger narrative – rather than just presenting it as a free-standing lyric poem" (2015: 103-4). Thus, by alluding to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Heaney aspires to adopt a more expansive and sophisticated approach to times of crisis. In addition to mere protest, Heaney envisions poetic drama as an impetus to inspire real change.

Looking for instances in the opening Chorus that situate the action of the play in Northern Ireland, these are cleverly placed and require some scrutiny. These occasions are mostly found in the first part of the ode, where the Chorus addresses the lamentable circumstance in which it is embroiled. For example, by referring to "People so deep into | Their own self-pity self-pity buoys them up", the Chorus brings up the trope of victimhood: the foregrounding of personal suffering as a principal identity marker is an impulse symptomatic of the Troubles. By refraining from naming those directly concerned, opting instead for the generic "people", Heaney underscores the

detrimental ubiquity of the phenomenon. This way, Heaney warns "how suffering can be so intense and protracted that it obliterates all other frames of reference" (McGuire 2016: 22); clearly indicated in the play by the lines "And their whole life is spent admiring themselves | For their own long-suffering". Such profound self-absorption with personal trauma is taken as perilous and futile, as it leaves no room for further action.

A more direct reference to the conflict comes one line after: "People so staunch and true, they're fixated". With 'staunch', Heaney evokes the so-called 'staunch Unionists', the hardline loyalist supporters of the British Crown in Ireland. The juxtaposition of 'staunch' with 'true' creates an ironic tone, as Heaney mocks those individuals for their tendency to believe they are always correct. Still, the choral ode represents more a general disapproval of the conflict than the endorsement or condemnation of either side: "It might be tempting to assign Heaney's description of self-pitiers to Northern Irish republicans, and to read 'People so staunch and true, they're fixated' as a description of Unionist loyalists; but, in fact, the lines could equally apply to the rhetoric of either group" (Rankin Russell 2011: 175). Indeed, the following lines are exemplary of how the Chorus concretises the blind devotion shown by members of both sides, highlighted by the double usage of the determiners 'all' and 'every':

> *All* throwing shapes, *every* one of them
> Convinced he is in the right, *all* of them glad
> To repeat themselves and their *every* last mistake. (*CT*: 1; italics mine)

The Chorus openly denounces all protagonists of the conflict, as Heaney exposes the underlying narcissism sustaining their unwavering positions. "Heaney uses the 'polished stones' simile to suggest the self-regard of both republicans and loyalists who, Narcissus-like, gaze at themselves, an image of reflection that is heightened by their 'flashing' around their wounds 'like decorations'" (Rankin Russell 2014: 175). By introducing this imagery, Heaney insists on the apparent inability of those implicated to constructively distinguish between their pride and pain. Instead, they go about "Licking their wounds", a phrase that is repeated by Neoptolemus later in the play when he orders Philoctetes to "Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things" (*CT*: 74).[36] For Heaney, to 'see things' is to look outside the intricacies of one's self; an activity involved "with transforming of the given, with preferring the imagined over the endured" (Heaney 2002: 176). This is a pursuit

[36] *Seeing Things* (1991) is also the title of the poetry collection that Heaney had in the works, whilst writing *The Cure at Troy*. In addition to their temporal proximity, there seems to be a thematic correspondence between the two projects: "Just as in *the Cure at troy* Heaney had found formal and stylistic means, taking his cue from antiquity and the urgent present, to formulate a vatic voice which might be deployed on public issues of strife and division without embarrassment or presumption, so, in *Seeing Things*, he creates an inclusive frame of reference where journeys into another dimension prove to be a return to 'the heartland of the ordinary', and vice-versa" (Peacock 1992: 249).

that is in clear alignment with the Chorus' appraisal of poetry's attributes. "You're making me see things in such brilliant light | I can't bear it" (*CT*: 73), are Philoctetes' corresponding words when he finally accepts that his wound needs healing.

Actually, Heaney's analogy of single-mindedness to 'polished stones' has its antecedent. In 'Easter, 1916', W. B. Yeats famously commemorates the Irish republicans engaged in the Easter Rising, sacrificing themselves for Ireland's independence. On three occasions in the poem, Yeats introduces the image of the stone to emphasize the revolutionaries' singular obsession with the assigned mission:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a *stone*
> To trouble the living stream.
> …
> Minute by minute they live:
> The *stone's* in the midst of all
> …
> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a *stone* of the heart.
> O when may it suffice? (1996: 180; italics mine)

While Yeats's poem expresses more celebratory tones regarding the dead Irish republicans than Heaney's Chorus does for those directly involved in the Troubles, it remains intriguing that Heaney opted for the charged image of the stone to convey the fanaticism of the reported period. This could be read as a subtle yet powerful method of forging a connection between the events depicted in *The Cure at Troy* and those recounted by Yeats in 'Easter, 1916', as both poets contemplate on the economy of pain fueled by violent moments in Irish history. This is another way for Heaney to attach topical Irish significance to the events that are to take place on stage, thereby placing his play within a wider historical genealogy.

Altogether, Heaney succeeds from the outset to render his play pertinent to a lived experience of distress. What is more compelling in that respect is how Heaney casts attention on the communal aspect of such ordeal: Heaney manages to override the customary divisions between the usual suspects of the conflict, illuminating instead what he thinks to be a common place for all, namely pain as a foundational basis upon which the multifarious episodes of the Troubles are based. With the inaugural ode, Heaney conveys that the impending story of Philoctetes will be something that concerns all, regardless of ideological and political convictions.

The Cure at Troy stands at the epicentre of the division, ingeniously epitomized by the Chorus' self-confessed standing "between | the you the me and the it of it". By the same token, Heaney's asserted 'in-betweenness' surfaces as a politically engaged position, not necessarily keeping equal distances between two conflicting camps, but rather including both in the articulation of a newly formed reconciliation discourse. It is an intersubjective point of mediation authorizing Heaney to make an intervention, otherwise unimagined. As Heaney has claimed: "The Greek Chorus allows you to lay down the law, to speak with a public voice. Things you might not get away with in your own voice, in *propria persona*, become definite and allowable pronouncements on the lips of the Chorus" (Hass & Heaney 2000: 23). Within this scheme, Philoctetes' pain, his wound, and the searching for a cure, are part of a shared communal experience, and will be discussed in more detail next.

'A Home Where I Was Never at Home': Lemnos as a Counterimage of the Troubles

Once the connection between *The Cure at Troy* and the Troubles is discernible, some critics seek direct correspondences. They attempt to assign real-life counterparts to the characters or identify specific Irish factions associated with certain events in the play. For example, Owen Dudley Edwards argues that "we can take the character Philoctetes as being Heaney's idea of the predicament of the Northern Ireland Catholic, isolated and ignored since the partition of Ireland in 1920" (1997: 47). Similar to this, Peter McDonald claims that: "Philoctetes might, for instance, represent the wounded and betrayed community of the Catholic North, and Neoptolemus the sometimes confused liberal conscience (English or Irish) trying to steer a curse between the rival claims of Philoctetes and Odysseus" (1995: 196). Marilynn Richtarik's understanding of the play is entirely different arguing that "the most obvious political readings of *The Cure at Troy* centre on Philoctetes as a Unionist, with his magic bow representing the so-called unionist veto over constitutional change in Northern Ireland" (2018: 107). Terry Eagleton, on the other hand, focuses on Odysseus' "devious *realpolitik"*, naming him "the Charlie Haughey of Lemnos", the then serving Irish Taoiseach (1998: 375). Finally, Hugh Denard turns the tables on Philoctetes' characterization, claiming he is a Republican revolutionary, set against the loyalist group of Odysseus and Neoptolemus:

> if one imagines an alignment of Philoctetes with a broadly Catholic stance, and Odysseus and Neoptolemus as occupying something akin to a Protestant position, Philoctetes with his bow can easily be regarded as analogous to a pre-ceasefire I. R.A., or militant republican position. His arms are 'decommissioned' by deception at first – the promise to take him 'home' perhaps signifying the end of partition – and then by force. (2000: 4)

Given the above examples, there is a plethora of proposals about the likely matches between the protagonists of the play and palpable Irish ideologies.[37] However, what the various analyses collectively disclose is the impossibility of a coherent assignment of roles. For example, Odysseus gets portrayed both as a Catholic and a Protestant. Likewise, is Philoctetes a Unionist, whereas Odysseus and Neoptolemus are Republicans or *vice versa*? Critics tend to reach precisely opposite conclusions. The demonstrated indeterminacy complicates, if not renders fruitless, the task of finding clear pairings.

[37] Richtarik accordingly proclaims: "Interpretations of the play vary from seeing it as a parable about the reintegration of nationalist factions (including the 'men of violence') to regarding it as a comment on the necessity of including unionists in any realistic vision of a united Ireland" (2004: 200).

The same applies to Troy. What does its imminent destruction signify, once Philoctetes agrees to set sail there? Is it the old regime that will get abolished or does its sacking represent something else? Who are the Greeks and who the Trojans? As Oliver Taplin accurately notes:

> Troy's 'meaning' in the play's system of political reference is ostensibly clear; it refers to Northern Ireland. But there is the problem that it also refers to a place that is finally sacked and that this prelude to the final battle, which seems to be about a miraculous change, is not in any coherent sense really about an alteration that will bring reconciliation. Instead, it will bring victory to one side and defeat to the other. This can all be dismissed by denying that the play should be mapped precisely on to the Northern Irish situation. But that would, surely, be to say that it can be partially mapped in that way only up to the critical moment. Then the allegory or the reference system can be abandoned. This seems unsatisfactory. (2004: 162)

Taplin's concerns about Troy's shaky symbolism are symptomatic of an ingrained critical tendency to read the play in terms of clear-cut antithetical pairings, and then look in which camp Heaney's sympathies lie. Since Troy eventually gets destroyed, is this what Heaney insinuates that will happen to one of the two antagonizing groups? This certainly goes against the grain of the reconciliatory finale of *The Cure at Troy*. Such discrepancy raises questions about whether Heaney misjudged Troy's capacity to reflect Northern Ireland, or if there is an unacknowledged factor at play. In fact, the only way out is to abandon Troy as the primary reference point for the Troubles and focus on Lemnos.

Lemnos is the island where Philoctetes is marooned, and the place where the entire conflict between him and the Greek band takes place. Yet, its weight as a site of figurative signification is overlooked due to the intangible presence of Troy. As McDonald argues: "the play is about a man with a wound, and he will be cured at Troy. But Troy is a place only discussed in the play: Philoctetes' intent is finally to go there, but the wound and Lemnos are what is shown. It is obvious that this is Ireland and the Irish who have suffered" (1996: 132). It is therefore more appropriate to view Lemnos, rather than Troy, as a counterimage of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This approach temporarily sets aside the problematic connotations of subsequent havoc and obliteration associated with the city of Troy. Also minding that "throughout the play intermittent volcanic activity on Lemnos functions as an objective correlative for the political and psychological turbulence which haunts and rives lives on and off-stage" (Parker 2016: 9), one is prompted to reevaluate Lemnos' symbolism in connection to the Troubles.

By viewing Lemnos as the foundation of all topical references to Northern Ireland, one is liberated from the futile task of determining each character's political conviction. Instead, it becomes clear that all on-stage incidents are relevant to those experiencing the Troubles firsthand, whether Unionist or Republican: "All parties are equally to blame in this drama where

intransigence is the obstacle to peace" (Torrance 2021: 284). Instead of entering into a 'who is who' contest regarding the Troubles, Heaney chooses to mirror the strife itself. This way, Heaney aims at representing the conflict from a holistic standpoint, namely to articulate what it means to be part of an ongoing experience of distress and suffering.

To accomplish this, Heaney foregrounds certain communal sentiments that succinctly capture the life prospects in Northern Ireland at the time. Particularly, Heaney places key utterances in the mouths of his characters, incorporating the everyday vocabulary of the Troubles. The following words by Philoctetes attest to this:

> Terrible times.
> I managed to come through
> But I never healed.
> My whole life has been
> Just one long cruel parody.
> This island is a nowhere. (*CT*: 18)

The insular reference to an island that "is a nowhere" applies both to Lemnos and Ireland. Heaney draws an analogy between the deserted Greek island that Philoctetes is stuck on and the sensation of entrapment that both Catholics and Protestants experience in places like Derry. Similarly, the "terrible times" that Philoctetes refers to, hint both at the ongoing wars in Troy and Northern Ireland. As for Philoctetes' bitter admission that he has "managed to come through," though not healed, it resonates directly with the original audience who carried on their backs nearly twenty years of turmoil, with no plausible prospects of resolution before them. This is even more the case when Philoctetes exclaims that "Every day has been a weeping wound | For ten years now. Ten years' misery and starvation" (*Ibid*. 19), a pronouncement that heightens the implication of his wound by elevating it into a collective trauma.

The examples above illustrate a potential alternative interpretation of Philoctetes' predicament, one that is less partisan and more inclusive. The anguish in Philoctetes' words sheds any Orange or Green nuances, pointing instead to a shared foundation of pain fueled by the political divide. This way, Heaney highlights certain feelings that insofar had remained muted. The end result is closer to a universal plea for help, an admission of defeat under sustained terror, rather than a targeted attack against a specific adversary. This culminates when Philoctetes, falsely believing that Neoptolemus will bring him back to Greece, bids farewell to Lemnos:

> We have to go, but before we go, I want
> To kiss this ground . . . Take one last farewell
> Of a home where I never was at home.

> Many's another would have given up.
> For most people, one glimpse of the life here
> Would have been enough. But I was fit for it.
> I matched necessity. I passed the test. (*Ibid*. 29)

The idea of a dwelling place that you cannot call home conveys the raw reality of the stalemate. With Philoctetes never being "at home" in Lemnos, Heaney brings out the ultimate truth about the daily life in the North: as long as the hostility persists, no one will be safe. In addition, Philoctetes' comment that "The island's all there is | That'll stand to me" (*Ibid*. 51) specifically recalls "the passionate attachment to the physical landscape of Ireland that, for many unionists, can coexist with their denial of any cultural affiliation" (Richtarik 2018: 107). This brings up an additional similarity between Lemnos and Ireland.

A final vindication that Lemnos represents something greater than a physical space comes when one compares the scene of Philoctetes' exit from the island in Sophocles and Heaney. In the ancient text, an assured Philoctetes seems to part completely with Lemnos: "Farewell, seagirt land of Lemnos, and send me off to a peaceful voyage, to the place where mighty Fate is bringing me, and the will of my friends and the all-taming god, who has accomplished this" (*χαῖρ', ὦ Λήμνου πέδον ἀμφίαλον, καί μ' εὐπλοίᾳ πέμψον ἀμέμπτως, ἔνθ' ἡ μεγάλη Μοῖρα κομίζει γνώμη τε φίλων χώ πανδαμάτωρ δαίμων, ὃς ταῦτ' ἐπέκρανεν*) (*Phil*. 1464-69). Contrastingly, in *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes carries the experience of confinement with him: "I'll never get over Lemnos; this island's going to be the keel under me and the ballast inside me. I'm like a fossil that's being carried away, I'm nothing but cave stones and damp walls and an old mush of dead leaves" (*CT*: 80). Philoctetes has been profoundly transformed by his exile, and although he finally escapes, he will always carry a part of the island with him. Specifically, the introduction of a nautical idiom ("keel" and "ballast" denoting 'base' and 'balance') to describe his everlasting association with Lemnos, demonstrates how Philoctetes' subsequent life is destined to hold remnants of his tormented past. Philoctetes has internalized what happened to him in Lemnos, and this anamnesis is set to function as a visceral compass.

Arguably, the overtones of Philoctetes' exodus from Lemnos are more pessimistic in Heaney than in Sophocles. Yet, this major contrast between the two authors unveils Heaney's treatment of Lemnos as a site of deep-layered signification. As Szabo claims: "Lemnos is a space of the mind, a limbo between reality and illusion, where solutions can be found but where hopes could be also destroyed. It is a 'no-man's-land' that provides the proper ground for discussions and solutions related to the conflict between personal loyalties and public calling" (2007: 181). If Philoctetes' suffering on the island mirrors the experience of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, preventing a complete blackout of these hardships is imperative for real progress to be made.

Philoctetes' reconciliation with the Greeks and, more significantly, the treatment of his wound, necessitate that he vividly remembers the events leading to this point. This is to prevent the repetition of mistakes and the reopening of old wounds. Heaney's Philoctetes must distance himself physically from Lemnos but remain connected mentally.

Heaney, then, seems to assert that the memory of the Troubles cannot – and should not – be erased, even if they are over. Similar to Philoctetes in Lemnos, people living in the North have been transformed by the hostile environment surrounding them. The protracted struggle, the long list of casualties, and the ongoing pain symbolically clustered around the island of Lemnos must not be buried in oblivion. Curiously, a successful breakaway from the painful reality of the Troubles entails the activation of a vivid reminder of this experience in the times yet to come. Philoctetes' avowal that he "will never get over Lemnos" is suggestive of this. As such, Heaney's Philoctetes is "part of the past and the future: he is what Ireland should be, one that can incorporate its past and sail into the future with a secure ballast" (McDonald 1996: 136). Therefore, having pinpointed Lemnos as the bedrock of the strife, the next step is to closely examine how the Troubles are represented in *The Cure at Troy*.

‘You’ve Turned Yourself into a Trojan, Lad’: The Intertribal Epistemology of the Troubles

As mentioned earlier, through the juxtaposition of the story of *Philoctetes* and the Troubles, Heaney is more interested in describing a phenomenon of discord than in assigning unambiguous historical roles to his characters. Throughout *The Cure at Troy*, there are several instances where the close reader senses Heaney’s effort to infuse his text with topical references to Northern Ireland. For Heaney, the imperative task is to convey the dynamics that arise when the individual conscience clashes with the demands of the group, along with the catastrophic repercussions of a factional mindset epitomized by the 'us versus them' mentality. Particularly, Heaney navigates the intricate triangle relationship of Odysseus, Neoptolemus, and Philoctetes to bring forth the conflicting forces of loyalty to the tribe and a broader solidarity with human suffering, as these are also manifested in his country.

From early on in the play, Odysseus sets the tone: “Just remember: you’re here to serve our cause” (*CT*: 6). This is the warning he gives to Neoptolemus, before disclosing that they will “work out some way | Of deceiving Philoctetes with a story” (*Ibid*.). Neoptolemus quickly understands that he does not represent himself in Lemnos, but the entire Greek army. He is a man on a mission, the projection of the Greek will. Odysseus, as the more seasoned of the two men, is responsible for keeping Neoptolemus on track: “And here we are then, Neoptolemus, | You and me. | Greeks with a job to do” (*Ibid*. 3). This phrase is crucial for understanding what Odysseus embodies: unwavering obedience to achieve an apparent higher goal. Failing to do so, will mean a blow to the whole Greek community. Appropriately, Odysseus’ biggest fear is that “the Greek cause is doomed” (*Ibid*. 7). In his mind, the communal goal of seizing the bow and taking Philoctetes to Troy justifies any means. When Neoptolemus questions his direct involvement in Philoctetes’ exile in Lemnos, Odysseus defends himself, claiming he merely followed orders: “Yes I left Philoctetes here. | Marooned him – but | Only because I had been ordered to” (*Ibid*. 3). It is evident that the normative Greek behaviour is goal-oriented: “My aim has always been to get things done | By being adaptable” (*Ibid*. 57), Odysseus exclaims. Indeed, Neoptolemus quickly discovers that political expediency takes precedence over virtuous behavior. Odysseus’ explicit words to him dispel any doubt: “Do it my way, this once. | All right, you’ll be ashamed | but that won’t last” (*Ibid*. 8).

Neoptolemus, however, is directed by an altogether different set of beliefs. “For Neoptolemus, just action is its own reward, although he understands that it is unlikely to be rewarding in the worldly sense of the word” (Richtarik 2018: 105). Grappling with his conscience, there is no way that tricking Philoctetes would not bring him shame. His ironic and reluctant stance toward Odysseus' instructions illustrates this:

> We're Greeks, so, all right, we do our duty.
> I don't think I could bear being called a traitor.
> But in all honesty I have to say
> I'd rather fail and keep my self-respect
> Than win by cheating. (*CT*: 8-9)

Neoptolemus struggles to embrace Odysseus' cynicism. He will do what is required, but only half-heartedly, as he considers the proposed scheme a "low behaviour" (*Ibid*. 8), a strategy that "boils down to a policy of lies" (*Ibid*. 9), simply put, a "Duplicity! [and] Complicity!" (*Ibid*. 11). As such, Neoptolemus is caught up in his own sense of truth and justice, suffering under Odysseus' coercion. "You don't think lying undermines your life?" (*Ibid*. 10), he questions Odysseus, being unable to follow his comrade's persuasion that trickery will "save the day" (*Ibid*.) for the Greeks. Even worse, when Neoptolemus asks him if "You can look me in the eye and still say that?" (*Ibid*), Odysseus authoritatively decries that "Scruples are self-indulgence at this stage" (*Ibid*.). Persistently in *The Cure at Troy*, the personalities of Neoptolemus and Odysseus are depicted to clash due to their fundamentally opposing values and approaches to moral dilemmas.

A daring interpretation of the Odysseus-Neoptolemus pair comes from Heaney himself. For Heaney, Odysseus and Neoptolemus do not necessarily represent two opposing ideologies or the generation gap between them, but they together reconstitute the divided self of those who grew up during the Troubles:

> Anyone who grew up in the north of Ireland from their moment of consciousness was aware of, if you like, a public dimension to their lives, they were bonded into a group, one side or the other side. And they were also living in the, you know, a personal, private intimate, the theatre of your own conscience and consciousness. So, the demand for solidarity was there from the start with your group, and if you were growing into some kind of authentic individual life, the imperative for solitude or self-respect or integrity or self-definition was there also. So there was always that little, sometimes quite often, an ill-fit between the group line, the party line if you like, and the personal condition. And that is precisely what drew me to *Philoctetes*, where… Neoptolemus is caught between the demands of loyalty and solidarity, he is a soldier on the Greek expedition and so he has to help the cause but in order to help the cause, he has to do something which infringes his own sense of truth and justice and self-respect, he has to tell a lie to this wounded man. So it's that friction between the demands of the group and the demands of the individual integrity. (Hardwick 2016: 2)

Heaney's confession is illuminating in terms of the play's hermeneutics. Although Philoctetes' wound and the cure it awaits manifestly relates to Northern Ireland, it is Neoptolemus' status that

serves as the common thread between what happens on and off stage. Stuck between the supposed collective good and personal autonomy, Neoptolemus' position resonates a well-known, supra-factional sentiment of suffocation. Characteristic of Neoptolemus' divided mind is the phrase he exclaims when he is gradually overtaken by pity and changes his mind over Odysseus' plan: "I'm all throughother" (*CT*: 48), a word "which will certainly need translation for a non-Irish audience" (Meir 1991: 98). Denoting someone who is in disorder and confused, Heaney uses this peculiar Irish word to express Neoptolemus' state of mind.

As such, the unremitting fight between collective cause and individual conscience becomes a dominant leitmotif in *The Cure at Troy*. "In crisis situations, as Odysseus knows, there is little room for the tender conscience. If your side wants to win politically, you all have to bond together. And that bonding can strangle truth-to-self" (Hass & Heaney 2000: 22). Especially because this collective action necessitates a hierarchical organizational structure, wherein the leader issues orders and the rest comply: "When the captain speaks, the crew has to obey" (*CT*: 58), the Chorus forcefully announces. Considering that Northern Ireland is also a place in crisis, it follows that this statement by the Chorus mirrors the overall *modus vivendi* there.

Neoptolemus finds himself entangled within this stringent model. He gradually starts to realize that his decision-making is controlled by a superior force. Although it severely torments him, this control cannot be bypassed. Characteristically, when Philoctetes demands his bow back, Neoptolemus refuses with affliction: "I cannot. | There's a cause, a plan, big moves, | And I'm part of them. I'm under orders" (*Ibid*. 51). Hearing this, Philoctetes insists that "Solidarity with the Greeks is a sham" (*Ibid*. 53), genuinely wondering whether "Are you all just yes-men?" (*Ibid*. 58). Such comment is not that far from the truth: with Philoctetes rebutting Neoptolemus, Heaney questions the limits of allegiance to an authority that has repeatedly abused its power. Being confronted by Philoctetes' suffering and the numerous injustices he has suffered from the Greeks, Neoptolemus' absolute duty and loyalty to the Greek cause is diminished to the point it seems farcical. Gradually, Neoptolemus realizes that he has also been a victim of the Greek mentality: "How did I end up here? Why did I go | Behind backs ever?" (*Ibid*. 53), he yells regretfully. "You did it because | You had agreed to do it" (*Ibid*.), savagely answers Odysseus refusing to acknowledge Neoptolemus' dilemma in all its complexity. So, Odysseus is not merely a pragmatist but an excellent bender of truth. With his arbitrary assessment of Neoptolemus' plight, it follows that Neoptolemus will also become expendable once he has succeeded in his mission.

To recapitulate, the opposition between Odysseus and Neoptolemus is not strictly personal, but pertains to broader ideological issues applicable to Northern Ireland. Specifically, Neoptolemus' change of heart translates to breaking the code of the tribe, something unforgivable as this is a "vital signifier in nationalist and unionist rhetorical structures" (Zirzotti 2014: 141). Once again, Heaney succeeds in rendering his play relatable to his home country and the Troubles.

If Odysseus embodies the calcified Northern Irish *status quo*, then Neoptolemus expresses a drastic subversion of such morals. The following dialogue is characteristic of this:

> Neoptolemus: I did a wrong thing and I have to right it.
> Odysseus: What was that?
> Neoptolemus: I did this whole thing your way.
> Odysseus: We were Greeks with a job to do, and we did it.
> Neoptolemus: I behaved like a born liar.
> Odysseus: But it worked. It worked, so what about it?
> Neoptolemus: Not for me. And I'm not leaving till the thing's put right. (*CT*: 64-5)

Following this heated conversation between Odysseus and Neoptolemus, "the gradual opposition between pragmatic tribal politics and a more open, humanistic ethics is unveiled" (O'Brien 2016: 251). Indeed, it is a bit comical that the two men fail completely to understand each other. Odysseus cannot process how Neoptolemus is not joyful, given that they have carried out their risky mission. For Odysseus what is correct and appropriate is to act according to the Greek interest. For Neoptolemus, on the other hand, righteousness possesses a more fluid and abstract subsistence. That is, a sense of justice that is not predetermined but subject to the givens one has before them. "You're capable, | Odysseus, and resourceful. But you have no values" (*CT*: 66), Neoptolemus utters with abhorrence. Truly, Odysseus has values, but these are near-sighted and outrageously utilitarian. As O'Brien elaborates: "For Odysseus, 'rightness' and 'justice' are values that are immanent in the ideological perspective of the tribe or community… He sees no sense of any transcendental or intersubjective form of justice in what Neoptolemus is attempting" (O'Brien 2016: 251). In a way, what Neoptolemus proposes is unthinkable for Odysseus, mainly because it is unknown to him. It is Odysseus' crumbling worldview that Neoptolemus challenges and seeks to upturn, by putting "Candour before canniness" (*CT*: 67).

Now, beyond the acknowledged dialectic between collective cause and individual conscience, there is another strong dynamic at play, typified by the 'us *versus* them' pair. This model engenders a binary way of understanding reality, exemplified by the idea that if one is not with us, then they are by default with the enemy. This polemical way of thinking is eminently restrictive, as it leaves no room for an alternative position between the two extremes. Especially in times of crisis, having to choose between two opposing camps becomes mandatory: one should be either Greek or Trojan, Republican or Unionist. If one individual fails to fully behave according to the set protocols of the group they theoretically represent, then they run the danger to be labelled as conspirators for the enemy: "That's real turncoat talk" (*Ibid*. 74), is a corresponding phrase sealing the play's prevailing atmosphere. The relentless expectation for everyone to serve as a role model for the community to which they belong can prove asphyxiating. In eras of conflict

and uncertainty, members of one's own tribe can be the harshest critics and very often the cause of one's downfall.

Heaney is bitterly aware of this tendency, as it is ubiquitous in all aspects of communal life in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, there are certain instances in *The Cure at Troy* where this formidable we/they distinction becomes palpable. Again, this becomes evident during an argument between Odysseus and Neoptolemus:

> Odysseus: What's so right about
> Reneging on your Greek commission?
> You're under my command here. Don't you forget it.
> Neoptolemus: The commands that I am hearing overrule
> You and all you stand for.
> Odysseus: And what about
> The Greeks? Have they no jurisdiction left?
> Neoptolemus: The jurisdiction I am under here
> Is justice herself. She isn't only Greek.
> Odysseus: You've turned yourself into a Trojan, lad,
> And that will have consequences. (*Ibid*. 67)

By hearing Neoptolemus proclaiming that he believes in a form of justice that overcomes the Greek command, Odysseus' immediate reaction is to portray Neoptolemus as a defector. The logic behind this is simplistic: since Neoptolemus does not conform to the Greek rules, he must be part of the Trojan camp. No further investigation is made as to whether Neoptolemus tries to convey something squarely different from a discourse of betrayal, namely the prioritization of unmediated justice over party politics.

Neoptolemus' viewpoint is radical, exactly because it escapes the 'us *versus* them' axiom, and tries to evaluate reality from a different standpoint. "There's a whole economy of kindness | Possible in this world" (*Ibid*. 37), he pledges to Philoctetes. Clearly, Neoptolemus sees things from a perspective that others fail to grasp. Translating this to Northern Ireland, Neoptolemus evades the intertribal epistemology of the Troubles dictating that any move or decision acquires meaning only when it is juxtaposed against the enemy. To give a vivid example of this: "What's the shame in working for a good thing? "(*Ibid*. 74), Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes. "But good for who? Me or my enemies?" (*Ibid*.), answers Philoctetes echoing the intertribal rivalry. Within this scheme, "a good thing" cannot be something shared, an outcome that is benefiting to all. This is the toxic mindset that Neoptolemus resists:

> [Neoptolemus] has moved beyond the intertribal epistemology of Odysseus, where not to be Greek necessitates one's being Trojan. Such a perspective severely limits one's range of choices: one is either Greek or Trojan— a parallel with the population of Northern Ireland being divided into the adversarial binarisms of Catholicism or Protestantism, nationalism or unionism, or republicanism or loyalism. That such identifications, such "firm roots," exist is beyond question; what is open to question, however, is whether it is wise to see them as all-encompassing, as doing so can cause the 'entrapment' that has mired Odysseus and from which Neoptolemus is determined to escape. Neoptolemus has moved into that third space, that third area, that becoming space of which we have spoken, and he dramatizes this more complex perspective throughout the play. (O'Brien 2016: 252)

So, it is erroneous to label Neoptolemus as a traitor when he chooses to chart his own course instead of following Odysseus'. He simply takes a completely different approach: attempting to persuade Philoctetes through openness and sincerity, recognizing that deception has yielded no results. Neoptolemus admonishes Philoctetes by inciting him that "You are to come | Of your own free will to the town of Troy" (*CT*. 72) and that "All this must come to pass" (*Ibid*. 73).[38] Neoptolemus does not seek to force Philoctetes to change, but to guide him to make that choice himself.

As in previous cases, the above sentences convey a double meaning: they not only relate to the Greek tragedy *per se*, but also signify a transformative shift in the assessment of the Troubles. Specifically, they encourage a course of action aimed at bridging the gap between the involved parties rather than exacerbating it. The intention is to demonstrate that generous behaviour constitutes a shared effort, benefiting everyone involved. Otherwise, as Neoptolemus forewarns Philoctetes, "The danger is you'll break if you don't bend" (*Ibid*. 75), an assessment that could very well serve as a coded warning concerning Northern Ireland.

[38] The last quoted sentence has a biblical resonance: "And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things *must come to pass*, but the end is not yet" (Matt. 24.6; italics mine).

‘Are You Going to Stay Here Saying No for Ever?’: The Northern Irish Conflict Incognito

Having systematically pinpointed the presence of a Northern Irish subtext in *The Cure at Troy*, it is surprising to see that Heaney has downplayed the deliberate existence of such underpinnings: “while there are parallels, and wonderfully suggestive ones, between the psychology and predicaments of certain characters in the play and certain parties and conditions in Northern Ireland, the play does not exist in order to exploit them. The parallels are richly incidental rather than essential to the version” (2002: 175). Considering this statement, it is curious that Heaney preferred his play to be received in such a nuanced manner. Are those occasions truly “richly incidental” or do their concealment add to the power of the intended reconciliatory message?

The impression that what unfolds on stage is in thematic proximity with the political situation in Northern Ireland can be justified in terms of the domestic language used. Throughout the play, Heaney makes an extensive use of Irish colloquialisms; words and phrases that are distinctly Irish. As Hugh Denard demonstrates:

> On a more general level, the language also serves to locate the version in a recognizably Irish context, with terms such as “slabbering,” “canny” and “canniness”, “hagged” (for “hacked”), “clouts,” “is his head away?” “shake-down,” “wheesht!” “that put me wild,” “I am astray,” “blather?” “shilly-shallyin,” “This is it . . .” becoming a statement of bewilderment, and the vernacular Heaney gives to the Sophoclean Merchant character, especially the use of the present simple in describing past events (“So Odysseus organises a night raid,” etc.), is also recognizably Irish. (2000: 4)

Yet, it is not only in the type of the language employed, where unmistakable references to Northern Ireland come up. It also relates to what is being said. There are several instances within the play that unavoidably draw parallels with the Troubles: “He’s condemning me to a death by hunger. | I am going to be a ghost before my time” (*CT*: 52), Philoctetes screams in agony, only to repeat a few moments later: “I am going to die here, | I’m going to die of hunger” (*Ibid*. 59). The spectator does not need to be Irish to call to mind the Republican hunger strikers upon hearing Philoctetes’ wailing words. The same goes for Hercules’ advice to Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to “Win by fair combat. But know to shun | Reprisal killings when that’s done” (*CT*: 79), echoing “the surge in sectarian tit-for-tat murders in Northern Ireland during the mid-to-late 1980s” (Parker 2016: 27). For the attentive reader with some knowledge of the Northern Irish affairs, such concealed allusions are not hard to decipher.

Yet, there are two more interrelated cases that demand further investigation to unveil their historic connection with the Troubles and its protagonists. The first involves an anathema directed by Philoctetes towards Menelaus and Agamemnon:

> God curse them all!
> I ask for the retribution I deserve.
> I solemnly beseech the gods to strike
> The sons of Atreus in retaliation. (*CT*: 19)

Philoctetes' vehement criticism of the Greek commanders mirrors the fiery denunciations made by Ian Paisley, the DUP leader, against Margaret Thatcher following the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave the Irish government a consultative role in Northern Ireland. While this development was considered by many a stepping-stone to ease the Troubles, it was fiercely opposed by the Unionist leader Paisley:

> We pray this night that thou wouldst deal with the Prime Minister of our country. We remember that the Apostle Paul handed over the enemies of truth to the Devil that they might learn not to blaspheme. O God, in wrath take vengeance upon this wicked, treacherous lying woman; take vengeance upon her, Oh Lord, and grant that we shall see a demonstration of thy power. (qtd. in Cochrane 2001: 27)

Actually, the main slogan of the Unionist protest campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement was the infamous 'Ulster says No'. Mass protests against the provisions of the treaty were held under this banner. With time, the slogan became exemplary of the steady suspicion towards any effort for compromise. Comparably, Philoctetes expresses his suspicion when Neoptolemus hands him the bow: "Where's the ambush? This I do not believe." (*CT*: 70). This is a very familiar reaction to any Loyalist or Republican faced with a constitutional impetus for change.

Also, in one of the most emotionally charged scenes of the play, Neoptolemus appeals to Philoctetes by invoking the Unionist 'No' propaganda but subverting its meaning:

> Neoptolemus: Do you deny
> The possibility of a change of heart?
> Philoctetes: Once was enough. You slithered in like this,
> All sincerity till you got the bow.
> Neoptolemus: Things are different now. I ask again:
> Are you going to stay here *saying no for ever*
> Or do you come with us? (*Ibid*. 69; italics mine)

Reading this, it is hard to believe that Heaney did not have in mind the Unionist reactionary stance. Neoptolemus challenges Philoctetes' obstinacy, and in that he simultaneously offers a critique on the Ulster crisis. By overturning the Unionist phraseology, Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes what purpose it serves to always react with hostility to any hint of change or progress. This, in turn, suggests that as long as the culture of refusal persists and forgiveness remains unfamiliar, the animosity in Northern Ireland will endure.

Minding the above examples, it is unlikely that all identified parallels to Northern Ireland are "richly incidental", as Heaney proclaimed. Instead, the Troubles and its protagonists are present as a subtext throughout the play. Therefore, it would perhaps be fairer to say that allusions to Northern Ireland are more 'incognito' than 'richly incidental'. This is not to say that Heaney wanted to confuse his audience or was dishonest about the play's relevance to his country.[39] The strength of such topical references rests in their subtlety, not in overemphasis: Heaney plants the idea of a potential resemblance between stage and real life, instead of shouting it out loud. Any alternative approach would likely fail, as magnifying this connection risks yielding unintended consequences. Explicitly stating the correspondence between Philoctetes' wound and the collective trauma of the Troubles would diminish the impact of the longed-for reconciliation message at the play's conclusion.

As it will be demonstrated in the following section, the culmination of such a message is found in the conclusive Chorus of the play. It is an encomium on hope that not only serves as a beacon for settlement and reconciliation, but also happens to be the most famous passage from *The Cure at Troy*.

[39] After all, Heaney "retrospectively dedicated [the play] to the victims of the 'Real IRA' bombing at Omagh in August 1998, which killed twenty-nine people and injured hundreds more" (Rankin Russell 2011: 173).

When 'Hope and History Rhyme': Pious Aspiration as an Antidote to the Troubles

As emphasized in the introduction, Heaney's major interpolations in the Sophoclean text occur at the outset and in the concluding sections of *The Cure at Troy*, respectively. Both times it is a choral ode that is superadded, encapsulating Heaney's poetic 'I'. In the introductory Chorus, Heaney describes the dystopian-like scenery of the Troubles, also establishing poetry's in-between position as the proper *medium* for one to speak of this period. Conversely, in the conclusive, Heaney delves into a visionary contemplation of reconciliation, recommending the advancement of hope as the only remedy to the sectarian division. As such, "it is precisely in the choric passages that Heaney most significantly uses his power *qua* poet to project hope, to make a kind of declaratory gesture" (Peacock 1992: 242). Correspondingly, in this section, it will be examined how Heaney speaks through the Chorus, with the ode serving as a plea for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

The two extra passages thematically correspond to each other with the conclusive ode providing a resolution to the issues raised in the inaugural one. If, in the introduction of *The Cure at Troy*, the Chorus laments its entrapment in a vortex of violence, pain, and terror, the play's finale sees the Chorus pushing through adversity in an attempt to overcome the arduous stalemate. Considering also that the position of the second ode is quite strategic, coming just before Hercules' speech that finally softens Philoctetes and makes him befriend his former enemies, one realizes that the two additional odes signal the start and finish of an extended reconciliation mission. In this transition from discord to concord, Heaney assumes the role of a guide. Just as he directed the Chorus to convey and condemn the harsh reality of the Troubles, he now employs it to inspire those affected and carve out room for hope to prevail. Emphasizing the shared experience of suffering, the final Chorus implies that putting an end to it requires a collective effort. Therefore, Heaney communicates through the Chorus that the prospect of redemption persists if blind retribution can transform into mutual concession.

To quote the entire choral piece:

> Human beings suffer,
> They torture one another,
> They get hurt and get hard.
> No poem or play or song
> Can fully right a wrong
> Inflicted and endured.
>
> The innocent in gaols
> Beat on their bars together

A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term. (*CT*: 77-8)

Like with the inaugural Chorus, this ode can also be divided into two distinct parts. The first part consists of the first two stanzas, where Heaney touches on the collective and reciprocal aspect of suffering, assigning to it an exchange value. Pain is something that all humans give and take. It is the real currency of all human interactions. Pain and suffering are two primordial givens that go hand in hand with life. They are part of the innermost core of human experience, as if predating civilization itself. The assertive statement of the first couplet ("Human beings suffer, | They torture one another") contributes to the solidification of this idea. Also, the following sequence of people getting "hurt" and getting "hard" exposes the aftermath of suffering: humans not only suffer, but they are also physically transformed by it. Given that no human life is devoid of sorrow, the focus

lies more on how a community effectively addresses pain than on how an individual escapes it. The Chorus appears fully conscious of this when suggesting that "No poem or play or song | Can fully right a wrong | Inflicted and endured". By this, the Chorus rejects the view of art being a panacea of all ills. But, as Carr Vellino notes, "the counter-implication is that a poem may partly right a wrong. This pairing of injustice and poetic redress invites exploration of a possible relationship, however tenuous, between poetry and justice" (2008: 53). So, although poetry cannot eradicate injustice, it can at least confront it.

At this point, one may recall the following lines from W. B. Yeats's 'On Being Asked for a War Poem':

> I think it better that in times like these
> A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
> We have no gift to set a statesman right;

Writing a poem about refusing to write a poem is another self-referential device, bespeaking the complications that arise for the poet when having to address a tough topic like war. Being asked by Henry James to compose a poem about World War I, Yeats questions the purposefulness of such assignment. Yet, Yeats's expressed pessimism about what positive input can poetry bring to politics in times of war, is undermined by the fact that Yeats answers in verse. Yeats yields to the temptation and crafts a war poem, even if it merely chronicles the futility of the arduous task before him. Similarly, in the concluding Chorus, Heaney addresses the manifestation of human misery, acknowledging that achieving its complete obliteration is beyond reach. For both Irish poets, while suffering cannot be circumvented, it seems crucial to be the focal point of poetic contemplation.[40] Evidently, with the Chorus Heaney puts forward "the question of art's efficacy as an agent of political and ethical amelioration" (Parker 2016: 26). Heaney is convinced that deep poetic reflection can indeed serve as a blueprint for a better world.[41]

The second stanza of the ode, although still dealing with the omnipresence of pain, is evidently more site specific, as Heaney refers to certain characteristic examples of suffering pertaining both camps of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Arguably, "this is the only place in the play where an allusion to the Troubles in Northern Ireland is so explicit and intrusive that it must

[40] Questioned early in his career whether he believes that in times of crisis 'poetry makes nothing happen', Heaney gave the opposite response: "It can eventually make new feelings, or feelings about feelings, happen, and anybody can see that in this country for a long time to come a refinement of feelings will be more urgent than re-framing of policies or of constitutions" (1972: 6).

[41] As another Northern Irish poet, Derek Mahon, has written, a good poem can be "a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level" (qtd. in Twiddy 2013: 426).

be recognized as such" (Taplin 2004: 160). Precisely, with the triple image of the innocent prisoners protesting, the father of a dead hunger-striker visiting his son's grave, and the wife of a murdered policeman collapsing, Heaney delivers a condensed description of the multiple variations of personal anguish in the Troubles.[42] These are the micro-histories of some representative victims, covering the whole ideological spectrum of the conflict. Significantly, the individuals mentioned are depicted to be entrapped in the same cluster of grief and violence giving rise to the idea that, despite their respective differences, their plight has a common denominator. Carr Vellino elaborates on this:

> The particulars of historical suffering in stanza two of the choral ode are the most obvious links to fifty years of twentieth-century sectarian strife in Northern Ireland, but Heaney, in his even-handed way, gives three different registers of that suffering. The first figure of social suffering, the innocent in jails, reminds us that before the waves of loyalist and IRA paramilitary retributive violence, there was an Irish civil rights movement inspired by Martin Luther King in the 1960s. This line also refers to the British governments' policy of interning suspected political militants such as the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven without trial in the early seventies. The second figure of social suffering, the hunger striker's father, should be read as a sign of Heaney's regard for the human impact of the 1981 IRA hunger strikes in which ten prisoners starved themselves to death in an effort to have themselves classified as political prisoners by the British government… Heaney's final figure of suffering is that of a police widow. While police security forces were implicated in collusion with loyalist paramilitaries as the Stevens inquiries made clear, it is again the human cost that Heaney registers. With each of these three swift examples, Heaney compassionately catalogues the personal toll of three kinds of implications in the Irish dilemma from across the political spectrum. (2008: 53-4)

Whereas the prisoners and the father of the hunger-striker are presumably Republicans, the dead policeman is part of the Royal Ulster Constabulary police force, and hence most likely a Protestant with Unionist inclinations. What Heaney showcases with this antithetical pairing is that a shared experience of pain has the power to bring even the most profound enemies closer. After mutually acknowledging suffering, individuals with opposing backgrounds and ideologies can establish common threads of communication. Thus, although pain is the main ingredient of the Troubles, a thorough assessment of it could potentially serve as the cornerstone for any realistic reconciliation dialogue.

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[42] Heaney eventually regretted these obvious Northern Irish implants: "once the performances started I came to realize that the topical references were a mistake. Spelling things out like that is almost like patronizing the audience" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421). In fact, the second stanza of the conclusive Chorus was completely removed from the excerpt of *The Cure at Troy* included in Heaney's anthology *Opened Ground* (1998). This strengthens the claim that camouflaged allusions to the conflict are the ones that work best.

Moving on, the second part of the choral ode comprises the remaining four stanzas and is characterized by a sudden mood change. Misery is substituted by hope, pain and fear by optimism and miraculousness. As for the grim reality of the Troubles, it is now seen through the lens of poetic imagination. In this new scenario, "*The Cure at Troy* portrays suffering while rejecting a victim mentality. It escapes its present moment of composition and performance by offering hope for an imagined end to contemporary conflict" (Rankin Russell 2011: 182). With actuality gradually giving way to possibility, Heaney maps out an escape route from the bleak reality of the dispute. The concluding lines of the Chorus can be read as an open letter to all those who are afflicted, implying that relief from their woes is within reach if they choose to take a leap of faith and embrace hope.

The pivotal expression indicating a swift and uplifting turn of events is found in the final line of the third stanza, encapsulated in the somewhat enigmatic statement of making "hope and history rhyme". Given the underlying irony that acoustically the two words do not rhyme, one rightfully wonders what this phrase possibly means. Is the expressed sentiment a utopian impulse, or rather, a practical proposal fully applicable to reality? As Aidan O'Malley underlines: "The idea of making hope and history rhyme invokes immediately… a chiasmic relationship between a transcendental ideal and human interaction" (2007: 302). Moreover, the supposed "once in a lifetime" occurrence of such phenomenon adds to its singularity.[43] How this hope comes to being and what are its characteristics? To answer this, it is essential to get a grasp of Heaney's theoretical understanding of hope.

Hope, for Heaney, is a notion that possesses particular philosophical underpinnings. Being hopeful entails a unique way of looking and acting in the world; it has clear-cut moral and epistemological dimensions. As hinted in 'The Redress of Poetry', Heaney claims that the coveted redress effects of poetry provoke "something like an exercise of the virtue of hope as it is understood by Václav Havel" (1995: 4), the influential Czech writer and politician. To directly quote Havel's definition of hope:

> The kind of hope I often think about I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest

[43] In 'Exposure' from *North*, an ambivalent Heaney contemplates his decision to escape Ulster and move South, blaming himself for missing out "The once-in-a-lifetime portent, |The comet's pulsing rose". In *The Cure at Troy*, the corresponding "once in a lifetime" phenomenon of the tidal wave of justice conveys a more optimistic outlook.

> in enterprise that are obviously heading for success, but, rather, an ability to work for something that is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed… Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (1986: 181)

Taking cues from Havel's argumentation, Heaney delineates the kind of hope he advocates in *The Cure at Troy* as belonging "in the realm of pious aspiration" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421). Heaney asserts that while he lacks ready-made solutions to break the stalemate, he firmly contends that resolution is only achievable if the conflicting communities prioritize the triumph of hope. In essence, hope stands as the singular antidote to the poisonous furnace of violence in Northern Ireland.

Following Havel's train of thought, reconciliation is the only outcome that makes sense for Heaney, and 'Hope' the sole means to achieve it. Therefore, the rhyming of "hope and history" must be understood as a prayer, vocalizing a yearning to break the incessant reproduction of violence in Northern Ireland. If 'History' is life as it is normally experienced, rhyming with 'Hope' is life as it should be lived. To see how this is rendered intelligible:

> With every reason to side with a history that says, "Don't hope," the poet uses three powerful water metaphors—a "longed for tidal wave of justice," "a great sea-change on the far side of revenge," and miraculous "healing wells"—to convey the force of an astonishing hope based in the possibility of wrongs righted. More astoundingly, in stanza four, the speaker uses the imperative voice three times: "hope, believe, believe" the poem cries out in the face of catastrophic history. (Carr Vellino 2008: 54)

The escalating sentiment of miraculous redemption is affirmed by the certainty "that a further shore | Is reachable from here" (*CT*: 77).[44] This shore is no other than Northern Ireland, but this time detached from Lemnos and what it notionally represents. Consequently, compared to the Sophoclean precursor, the protagonists of the Troubles substantiated in Philoctetes' wound do not need to travel to another place to find the cure they desperately need, but to look for it within and between themselves. So, upon hearing that "The winds are blowing and the tides are high" (*Ibid*. 80), this is an inner journey that Heaney's natives are invited to embark on.

In the face of significant political upheavals, "Heaney succeeded in the construction of a language of compromise and cooperation, propounding a vigorous ethos of optimism that had not previously been considered feasible" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2021: 26). The compelling rhyming of "hope and history" is a direct outcome of this mindset. It is a public declaration to imagine a new

[44] Philoctetes' enthusiastic response also involves a water metaphor: "Something told me this was going to happen. | Something told me *the channels were going to open*" (*CT*: 79; italics mine).

reality for Northern Ireland “in the megaphone sense of the term” (O’Driscoll 2008: 385). Overall, Heaney mapped out an escape plan from the Troubles, exemplified by the treatment of Philoctetes’ wound. *The Cure at Troy* turns out to have a happy ending, becoming a frame of reference for the peace process in Northern Ireland. “I feel I’m part of what was always meant to happen, and is happening now at last” (*CT*: 80), are Philoctetes’ last words before setting sail to Troy to find the cure he desperately needs, a statement that is all too pertinent to the peace talks in Northern Ireland. As a result, the following comment by Stephen Wilmer feels rather apt: “the Greek tragedies have been used by Irish poets not so much to express tragedy as to express hope – a hope that comes out of years of tragedy” (1996).

Remarkably, “the vision Heaney presents at the end of *The Cure at Troy* seemed utopian in 1990, but it would be realized to an extent that no one then could have predicted before the end of the decade” (Richtarik 2018: 110). Judging from its immediate impact, Heaney’s play was literally a ray of hope shining over Northern Ireland, as the "hope and history" verdict transcended the confines of theatre to influence the political sphere, both in Ireland and abroad, prompting Hugh Denard to acknowledge that *The Cure at Troy* is among the "few other dramatic texts which can claim to have acquired such prominence in the political affairs of modern times" (2000: 2).

After the Troubles: The Hopeful Afterlife of a Historic Verse

The Troubles officially ended on 10 April 1998, with the signing of the so-called Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, ratified by two referenda in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. With this in effect, the violence and atrocities from both opposing camps were largely put to a halt. To borrow Heaney's *dictum*, such agreement signified the work of hope in history. This is not an overstatement considering that *The Cure at Troy* never really left the spotlight until the securing of the agreement. As Taplin remembers: "The phrase 'Hope and history rhyme' even went on to supply newspapers with their front-page headlines at the time of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998" (2004: 145). This indicates how influential Heaney's play has been in the coming ground-breaking developments in his country. In the subsequent years, the desire to make "hope and history rhyme" would attain a talismanic status, being used "by politicians of various political stripes" (Richtarik 2018: 99), and eventually come to be seen as synonymous with transformation and advancement in world politics.

The earliest politician to quote Heaney was Mary Robinson, the first female politician to be elected President of Ireland. On 3 December 1990, a couple of months following the staging of *The Cure at Troy*, Robinson concluded her inaugural address by invoking Heaney's famous lines:

> May God direct me so that my Presidency is one of justice, peace, and love. May I have the fortune to preside over an Ireland at a time of exciting transformation when we enter a new Europe where old wounds can be healed, a time when, in the words of Seamus Heaney 'hope and history rhyme'. (2012: 180)

Robinson's declaration serves as clear evidence of how rapidly Heaney's lines have been integrated into the Irish consciousness. Also, in the opening ceremony of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation established in Dublin in 1994, Dick Spring, the then Irish Minister for Foreign affairs, read aloud the same lines to set the tone for the Forum's workings.[45] In both instances, the speculative assertion of the alignment between "hope and history" comes to fruition through its connection with concrete political initiatives.

Even more profound is the application of the phrase in Northern Ireland. This came from Bill Clinton, who made a presidential visit in Derry on 30 November 1995, to assist the peace initiative. Today, Clinton's historic visit is generally regarded as catalytic for the securing of the Good Friday Agreement, "bringing the weight of American influence and dollars to bear on the

[45] Also, Jacques Santer, the then President of the European Commission, quoted Heaney's lines upon addressing the Forum in 1995 (Zirzotti 2014: 9).

Northern Irish peace process" (Denard 2000: 1). Standing in the square facing Guildhall – literally in front of the building where *The Cure at Troy* was staged – Clinton addressed an ecstatic mixed crowd of Catholics and Protestants, commending them to give peace a chance. Memorably, Heaney's lines on hope lay at the heart of Clinton's speech:

> Well, my friends, I believe. *I believe we live in a time of hope and history rhyming*. Standing here in front of the Guildhall, looking out over these historic walls, I see a peaceful city, a safe city, a hopeful city, full of young people that should have a peaceful and prosperous future here where their roots and families are. That is what I see today with you. (qtd. in Impens 2021: 225; italics mine)

It is indeed extraordinary how Clinton reiterated the famous Chorus lines only a few steps outside the theatre where they were first heard. As such, Heaney's appeal to hope would manifest in a profound and prolific manner, taking on tangible form and substance. In Clinton's words, the Northern Irish people would witness the political realization of what Heaney had proposed a few years earlier in the form of a theatrical play.[46] With this, the hope invoked in *The Cure at Troy* was really becoming part of history.

Clinton came to consider his Derry visit as one of the most significant moments of his presidency. The following year, in the time preceding his re-election in the White House, Clinton would publish a book entitled *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century* (1996). In there, Clinton narrates what he thinks to be the most fundamental principles and accomplishments of his first term in the White House.[47] The title's obvious allusion to Heaney's line validates the burgeoning strength of such verse. Now, the "hope and history" maxim is disengaged from its Northern Irish origins and transplanted into the entirely new terrain of American politics. This can be regarded as the decisive step for the phrase to attain a universal stature, as since then its connotations gradually change and extend to denote a numinous code of political conduct.

In fact, Bill Clinton is not the only United States President to cite Heaney. Within this tradition, Joe Biden has been recorded to use Heaney's phrase three times, before assuming office. Two times as Vice President, "at a memorial service for the Boston Bombing in 2013, and again in a speech he gave about Israel and Palestine" (McGuire 2019: 26). More recently, the phrase

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[46] Taplin makes known that "on the wall of his home at Chappaqua, NY, Clinton has a framed postcard from Heaney which says, 'It was a fortunate wind that blew you here.' This is from the closing lines of *The Cure at Troy*" (2004: 145).

[47] Two more books written by leading political figures have borrowed their title from Heaney. The first is by Gerry Adams, the long-serving leader of the Irish Republican Sinn Féin party, who, in *Hope and History* (2003), discusses his direct involvement in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The second is by Nadine Gordimer, the late South African writer and anti-apartheid activist, who published a volume of political essays entitled *Living in Hope and History* (1999).

emerged at the Democratic National Convention on 20 August 2020, marking Biden's official nomination for the upcoming presidential elections. Concluding his victory speech, Biden addressed the audience: "Are you prepared? I believe we are. This is our moment to 'make hope and history rhyme'" (Armus 2020). It is plausible to assert that Heaney's verse has become the focal slogan of Biden's campaign to win the elections, especially given that on 29 October 2020, Biden released a video on his official YouTube channel where he recited the entire Choral ode (Biden 2020).

To return now back to *The Cure at* Troy, a particular observation stands out. Following this long chain of politicians embracing Heaney's invocation to hope, it is remarkable how the seminal traces of *Philoctetes* are progressively getting lost. That is, although the rhyming of "hope and history" was arguably the culminating moment of a very influential Irish version of the eponymous ancient play, the implicated phrase now seems to enjoy an independent standing. As exhibited in the political jargon of today, the phrase acts as a stimulus to inspire change and societal improvement. It is actually questionable as to whether those using it are mindful of its initial context, namely the verse's relation to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, let alone the ancient source-text standing behind. Presently, it could be said that the "hope and history" maxim stands alone, disassociated from Philoctetes' story of hatred and reconciliation, anger and forgiveness.

Yet, one could argue that Heaney would likely be delighted with this outcome. As hinted in the opening section of this analysis, by appropriating the story of *Philoctetes*, Heaney did not aim at limiting his scope to the intricacies of the conflict in his home country, but taking cues from this event, he aspired to establish a firmer and wider response model to times of crisis. There is little room to deny that Heaney made this happen: judging from its ongoing reception, *The Cure at Troy* is as much an Irish adaptation of a Greek tragedy with topical affinity to the sectarian division in Northern Ireland as much a contemporary Irish play with universal resonance and applicability, now that the Troubles are over and Philoctetes' wound is cured.

The Burial at Thebes: Antigone Keening Beyond the Pale

Antigone Again: The Unsung Legacy of *The Burial at Thebes*

As hinted in the introduction of this chapter, *The Burial at Thebes* was a project marked by considerable hesitation for Heaney. Adapting *Antigone* did not come as naturally to him as adapting *Philoctetes*, partly because the latter was his personal choice, whereas *Antigone* was a request from the Abbey board. Situated chronologically in a post-Troubles era and lacking Field Day's intellectual guidance this time, the preparation of *Antigone* for the Irish stage could not simply follow the trodden path. Specifically, the time period from 1990 to 2004 separating the two plays brought about significant changes to both Heaney and his country: not only was it a drastically different Ireland that Heaney was faced with, but in the meantime Heaney's voice as a Nobel laureate author had been amplified, reaching international stature.

Heaney's initial struggle with *Antigone* is central to the critical understanding of the play, considering also that he vocalises his doubts in the endnote of *The Burial at Thebes*:

> The invitation to translate *Antigone* for the Abbey's centenary programme was an honour, but at first I wasn't sure whether to accept. How many *Antigones* could Irish theatre put up with? 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 a 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? (*BT*: 75)

On one hand, the plethora of Irish *Antigones*, and on the other, the assumed scarcity of innovative approaches to the Greek play, outline Heaney's position at the outset of the creative process in writing *The Burial at Thebes*. If with Philoctetes Heaney feared that the Greek hero would be largely unfamiliar to Irish audiences, now things are reversed, with Antigone being very well known in Ireland. With a fixed canon of Irish *Antigones* laying ahead, Heaney recognized the implicated dangers to fit in his version.

The entire issue comes down to one question: how could Heaney make *Antigone* 'his own', creating a play markedly different from those recently staged by his peers, but still distinctly Irish? Also, with Heaney having used Greek tragedy to address the Troubles, another looming challenge in adapting *Antigone* involved the new way he would have to integrate various Irish elements in his text. The singular issue that tantalized (Northern) Ireland for nearly forty years had been constitutionally met, opening up the potential for Greek drama to be associated with other Irish

concerns. This outcome, however, could momentarily create uncertainty for an author who previously reworked an ancient play in a more straight-forward, goal-oriented manner. Neil Corcoran, in his Guardian review of the play, comments:

> This version is less transparent to specific political instance than *The Cure at Troy*, even if Tiresias's encouragement to Creon must sound with particular resonance from a poet whose work has been so profoundly involved in the matter of Northern Ireland: "All men make mistakes. | But mistakes don't have to be forever. | They can be admitted and atoned for. (2004)

Given the evolving historico-political climate in Ireland, it follows that, in terms of content, *The Burial at Thebes* could not be as monothematic as *The Cure at Troy*.

A crucial point when assessing Heaney's Greek plays is the critical attention they have received over time. One quickly notices an asymmetry: the number of entries in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes dedicated to *The Cure at Troy* is greater than those about *The Burial at Thebes*. Although the difference in the production time of the two plays could partially explain this phenomenon, and perhaps in the future more research will be conducted on *The Burial at Thebes*, still Heaney's reception of *Philoctetes* has proven the most noted and studied endeavour. This is not to say that *The Burial at Thebes* has been neglected, but it surely did not have the same impact as *The Cure at Troy* had had, culturally speaking and in academia.[48] This discrepancy supports the case that the two Heaneyan revisions were composed at two distinct moments in Irish history: *The Burial at Thebes* during a comparatively more peaceful and less eventful period than *The Cure at Troy*. Consequently, this disparity explains why the latter overshadows the former in terms of scholarly recognition.

Overall, the main sources of commentary about *The Burial at Thebes* come from Heaney himself, who has spoken at length about the composition of his play. Other than that, on the occasions that *The Burial at Thebes* was in the spotlight by other critics, it seems to have generated mixed feelings:

> From the very beginning, controversy surrounded the play, critics disapproving of the change of title, considering that, by changing *Antigone* into *The Burial at Thebes* the focus of the play shifts from the heroine who fights for the familial right of burial, to the burial itself, to the dead hero

[48] Interestingly, Heaney seems to value higher his artistic output in *The Burial at Thebes* than in *The Cure at Troy*. Enumerating the reasons why, he noted: "For one thing, I had a different purchase on the actual line-by-line writing, and more pleasure in it. The blank verse in *The Cure* came to feel like a container for the paraphrasable meaning. There wasn't any great job of fashioning being done – whereas, in *The Burial*, I started with the idea of making different metrical provisions for different characters and different phases of the action, which gave me a far greater sense of mining a verbal face" (O'Driscoll 2008: 422).

> brother, leaving the female protagonist in the background and giving way to yet another patriarchal interpretation of the text. (Szabo 2007: 185)

In the following sections this view will be rebutted, particularly in the context of funeral rites and the keening of the dead, which are central to the Irish sense of self. Actually, the shift of the title's focus to 'burial' became Heaney's way to adopt "a wider Celtic frame that affords [his] Irish Antigone representative status" (Harrison & Macintosh 2019: 4). Heaney recognized in Antigone's defiant act of burying Polyneices a mythic equivalent to a central Irish practice that permeates both public and private life. Hence, the explicit emphasis on burial is not a miss, as some critics may have claimed, but Heaney's way to Irishize *Antigone*.

The fact that Heaney's version of *Antigone* was the first to emerge in a post-conflict context will be a central consideration of this analysis. As Macintosh insinuates: "Perhaps, the difficulty for Heaney was not simply (as he implied) that he was writing within a long tradition of Antigones, but that he was writing at the end of a particular tradition and at the dawn of a new one" (2011: 102). Indeed, at the beginning of the 21st century, Ireland was gradually freeing itself from a long period of arduous navel-gazing. Many Irish writers began to think about Ireland's wider place in the world and the way Irish literature could be globally relevant, without losing any of its peculiar traits. Heaney, once again, pioneered in this: in *The Burial at Thebes* Heaney looks in and out of the Irish border and comes up with a play that interlaces certain ingrained Irish elements with the prevalent international events of the day like the war in Iraq and George W. Bush's detrimental foreign policy. Truly, Marianne McDonald's assertion that "This is the tragedy of Ireland; this is the tragedy of the world" (2019: 146) solidifies Heaney's achievement in *The Burial at Thebes*.

What follows is an examination of how this is made possible, specifically how Heaney uses the Antigonean themes to align local Irish elements with the current affairs of the time.

'And Bury Him, No Matter…?': From Thebes to Toomebridge

By changing the title of Sophocles' tragedy, Heaney places the act of burial at the epicentre, designating 'burial' as the driving force of *Antigone*. The (non)buried status of Polyneices serves as the catalyst of the events that are about to unfold: Antigone's decision to take care of the corpse that laid unattended precipitates the imminent bloodbath and decimation. Both Creon and Antigone are well aware of the significance of Polyneices' burial, and for their respective reasons, they actively resist or endorse such act. Antigone's insistence to perform funeral rites to Polyneices is a palpable gesture of inclusion and recognition, whereas Creon's edict to let Polyneices rot translates to his erasure from the chronicles of the *polis*. Either way, the handling of the dead is never neutral, but rather pertains to an intricate nexus of power relations between competing powers. Burial is as much a political act as a spiritual and familial affair.

Starting with Sophocles, the first direct mentioning of burying Polyneices' body comes from Antigones' sister Ismene, who fearfully asks: "So, you plan to bury him, although it is forbidden by the city?" (*ἦ γὰρ νοεῖς θάπτειν σφ', ἀπόρρητον πόλει;*) (*Ant.* 44). Here, it becomes immediately evident what the act of burial opposes, namely the state of Thebes embodied by Creon. Politically, Polyneices is considered a traitor, and Creon, occupying the seat of power of Thebes, is the one to judge about the future of Polyneices' body. Heaney, in the corresponding passage from *The Burial at Thebes*, makes Ismene to imply this by using three suspension points instead of referring directly to the city of Thebes or Creon: "And bury him, no matter…?" (*BT*: 8). In this case, the attention switches from the repercussions that Antigone will face by laying dust on Polyneices – "The common handful of clay" (*Ibid*. 7) as Antigone defines it – to her steadfast resolve to accomplish the deed. Clearly, Antigone's determination is a product of a different value system: Antigone asks Ismene whether "Are we sister, sister, brother? | Or traitor, coward, coward?" (*Ibid*.), thus prioritizing familial bonds over the control and jurisdiction of the state.

Remarkably, the above confrontation that mythically took place in Thebes, was re-enacted in real life in Toomebridge, a small village in Northern Ireland. Ironically, the etymology of the placename comes from the Irish word *tuaim*, connoting a burial mound. In place of Polyneices there was Francis Hughes, an Irish hunger striker who died on 12 May 1981, after refusing any food for fifty-nine days. Hughes followed Bobby Sands in a total of ten Republican men that starved to death in the so-called H-Blocks of Maze prison, collectively demanding to be recognized as political prisoners.[49] Heaney was personally affected by this loss, as he was part of the wider circle of the deceased:

[49] According to Heaney, Francis Hughes was "one of a group of IRA prisoners ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for what were known at the time as the five demands. Basically these demands constituted a claim by the prisoners to political status, a rejection of the demonizing terminology of criminal, murderer and

> Although I had never known [Hughes] personally, our families had been friends for a couple of generations and I had grown up friendly with his older brothers and sisters. So, because of all those ties of memory, affection and community, my mind kept turning towards that corpse house in Co. Derry… What was in the eyes of the world at large the death of an IRA hunger striker was in the eyes of a smaller, denser world the death of a son and a neighbour. (Heaney 1995: 186-7)

Echoing the dual identity of Polyneices – a traitor for Creon, a brother for Antigone – Francis Hughes was viewed differently by distinct groups of people. This phenomenon culminated the day that Hughes' body was meant to be transferred from Maze prison to his family home in Toomebridge for the wake and funeral. Instead of the body to be immediately released and handed over to Hughes' family, "it was escorted 'as state property' by the police along some thirty or forty miles from the Maze prison to Toome, generating a rage in the awaiting crowd" (Torrance 2020: 331). Similar to Polyneices, Hughes' body becomes a site of struggle, contested between two rival parties: Hughes' family and the British police.

Naturally, the illicit capture of Hughes' body by the British authorities was majorly condemned by Irish public opinion, especially between the Republican sympathisers, militant or more moderate.[50] As Heaney explains:

> The surge of rage in the crowd as they faced the police that evening was more than ideological. It did of course spring from political disaffection, but it sprang also from a sense that something inviolate had been assailed by the state. The nationalist collective felt that the police action was a deliberate assault on what the Irish language would call their *dúchas*, something that is still vestigially present in English-speaking Ulster in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. (Heaney 2004b: 413)

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terrorist, and an assertion of their rights to wear their own clothes, to abstain from penal labour and to associate freely within their own cell block. Faced with all this, Margaret Thatcher and her government were predictably inflexible and between 5 May and 30 August 1981, ten hunger strikers died, resulting in a steady issue of emaciated corpses from the gates of the prison and repeated processions of miles long funeral crowds through the gates of cemeteries" (2004b: 412).

[50] *The New York Times* reported the electrified atmosphere at the day of the funeral: "the funeral procession this afternoon to a country churchyard in this peaceful little village 25 miles west of Belfast was accompanied by masked paramilitary commandos in battle dress… The tense military mood - set not only by the hard-looking young men with their masks and guns but also by four British Army helicopters that clattered overhead… More than 5,000 people turned out for his funeral, many of them having to walk several miles across country because the hundreds of policemen patrolling the remote area in bulletproof vests had closed off most roads leading into Bellaghy. When the cortege reached the 100-year-old graystone church, the Rev. Michael Flanagan, the Hughes family's parish priest, was at the gate, carefully observing the policy of the Roman Catholic Church on I.R.A. funerals: The paramilitary activities stopped at the church door as Father Flanagan and several altar boys led the procession inside" (Borders 1981).

Dúchas is one of those Irish words that remain largely untranslatable. In an attempt to clarify the term, the Irish critic Brendan Devlin offers an extended definition:

> In an effort to explain it in English, the Royal Irish Academy's dictionary of the common old Gaelic languages uses such terms as 'inheritance, patrimony; native place or land; connection, affinity or attachment due to descent or long-standing; inherited instinct or natural tendency'. It is all of these things and, besides, the elevation of them to a kind of ideal of the spirit, an enduring value amid the change and the erosion of all human things. (1986: 85)

The Irish *dúchas* can be described as a set of values shared amid one's community and kin. It is a sacred domain, impenetrable by external forces. In fact, Heaney makes his Antigone reflect this when she exclaims to Ismene: "What are Creon's rights | When it comes to me and mine?" (*BT*: 9). From this standpoint, Polyneices' burial surfaces as a strictly personal matter for Antigone. By extension, Antigone follows a code of behaviour that rules out Creon's influence as head of state: "I'm doing what has to be done" (*Ibid*. 12), she assuredly announces. To this Antigone adds that "There's no shame in burying a brother" (*Ibid*. 32), an assertion that reflects her total lack of remorse to do what she thinks correct, whether prohibited or not. Polyneices, an "anti-Theban Theban prepared to kill" (*Ibid*: 17) according to Creon, is for Antigone "no common criminal" (*Ibid*. 33). Interestingly, Antigone's evaluation of Polyneices echoes and upturns Margaret Thatcher's infamous saying that 'Crime is crime is crime, it is not political' about Francis Hughes and the rest IRA hunger-strikers.

Certainly, one of Heaney's notable achievements in *The Burial at Thebes* is the echoing of an unmistakably Antigonean episode of contested burial occurring in Northern Ireland.[51] Heaney has been clear about this: "If we wanted… to find a confrontation that paralleled the confrontation between [Antigone] and King Creon we could hardly do better than the incident on the street in Toomebridge" (2004b: 413). To give a vivid example, Creon's pronouncement against Polyneices resonates with the bitter events surrounding Hughes' funeral:

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[51] Michael Parker brings up two more events coinciding with *The Burial at Thebes* that inform the play's political context: "Two other unresolved local narratives haunted the sixteen-month period that Heaney worked on *Antigone*. Around the time the Abbey commission was mooted, Westminster and Dublin governments intensified pressure on the Provisional IRA to accelerate decommissioning weapons and to reveal the whereabouts of the remains of the 'disappeared', seventeen people abducted, killed and secretly interred during the first decade of the Troubles… Largely concurrent with this focus on the fate of the 'disappeared' was media coverage of the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, set up by the Blair government in Westminster in January 1998 to establish the truth about the killing of thirteen civilian demonstrators by the British Army in Derry on 30 January 1972. It was a recognition of a need for redress and intended to advance the Peace Process. For Heaney, the central conflict addressed in Sophocles' play was not dissimilar to that surrounding the victims of Bloody Sunday, who in a figurative sense remained 'unburied', despite the solemnities held for them in early February 1972" (2019: 104-5).

> He is forbidden
> Any ceremonial whatsoever.
> No keening, no interment, no observance
> Of any of the rites. (*BT*: 17)

Knowing Hughes' story, Creon's words are conspicuously relatable. Like Creon, the state authorities did everything in their power to not allow Hughes' relatives and friends to properly mourn him. In a sense, Heaney's Antigone experiences a violation comparable to the events in Toomebridge, and like the Irish crowd, she decides to take action and perform the funeral rites, as the protocol dictates. Bringing the two incidents together, it follows that "Both the civilians' opposition to the English soldiers and Antigone's position are interpreted as forms of loyalty to the *dúchas*" (Zirzotti 2014: 137). They represent a set of unwritten rules that both Antigone and the Irish Republicans fervently adhere to.

In light of this, and to underline the centrality of 'burial' in his adaptation, Heaney concedes the following:

> Putting 'burial' in the title signals to a new audience what the central concern of the play is going to be. But because it is a word that has not yet been entirely divorced from primal reality, because it recalls to us our final destiny as members of the species, it also reminds us, however subliminally, of the solemnity of death, the sacredness of life and the need to allow in every case the essential dignity of the human creature. Wherever you come from, whatever flag is draped on the coffins of your dead, the word 'burial' carries with it something of your *dúchas*. It emphasizes, in other words, those 'Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship' which authority must respect if it is not to turn callous. (2004b: 426)

Heaney indicates that 'burial' and its rituals have never ceased to be important, from Sophocles' time to today's Ireland. Aptly quoting Hegel, Heaney suggests that the way communities pay their respects to the dead is indicative of the "Instinctive Powers of Feeling, Love and Kinship" (2019: 1796), which motivates Antigone as well as Hughes' family and friends, understanding it as their *dúchas*. Familial oversight over burial practices and civic expression of grief is something that any political authority, whether Creon or Thatcher's cabinet, needs to make room for and comply with, so as not to become tyrannical.

Having shown how the unrest in Toomebridge has served as the contextual framework for *The Burial at Thebes*, the next section considers how Heaney looked for inspiration in traditional Irish lament songs, attempting to find a fitting voice for his Antigone.

Looking for that Three-beat Line: An Irish Lament for Antigone's Grief

Reading through *The Burial at* Thebes, one expects a certain number of interventions to the ancient text, similar to *The Cure at Troy* and the two extra choral parts inserted there by Heaney. However, this is not the case: Heaney admits that "when I came to do the *Antigone*, I kept much more strictly to the original" (O'Driscoll 2008: 421). Recalling that Heaney's additions to *Philoctetes* were essentially the passages in which most of the key Irish allusions were found, the absence of such passages from *The Burial at Thebes* makes one wonder whether this time an Irish substratum really exists.

Yet, there are some other strategies that Heaney follows to Irishize *Antigone*, apart from the infusion of the Sophoclean text with additional passages directly related to Ireland. Heaney once stated about *The Burial at Thebes* that "Even though there was an urgent political context, there was no writerly urge" (Heaney 2005: 171). Heaney found an Irish solution to this problem in discovering in traditional Irish lament songs a cure for his writer's block: "The eye of the needle I passed through in order to re-enter the kingdom of Thebes was an Irish one and I found it in the nick of time, the night before I was due to give my decision to the Abbey Theatre's artistic director" (Heaney 2004b: 422). Accordingly, it will be argued that the rich legacy of Irish lament songs serves as an indispensable component of the play's hermeneutics and of its critical reception. In addition to this, it will be shown how Heaney – without deviating at any point from the Sophoclean source-text – achieves to incorporate into the characters of *The Burial at Thebes* and especially Creon certain keywords and mannerisms reminiscent of some groundbreaking contemporary historical events and their perpetrators.

Not knowing Greek, and similar in his dealing with *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney had to rely on English translations of *Antigone*, in this case two substantially older ones by R.C. Jebb (1904) and E.F. Watling (1947), and a more recent by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1994) (McGuire 2017: 292). Given the almost half a century separating each translation from the next, one would expect that the English vernacular used in the three attempts would vary drastically. Still, all of the above are scholarly and authoritative translations of *Antigone* that tend to stick to the ancient text as much as possible, providing a faithful word-to-word rendition of the Greek play into English. No doubt, such translative works have helped Heaney with the sense of *Antigone* and allowed him to keep on track with the plotline of the Sophoclean tragedy while he was writing *The Burial at Thebes*. For Heaney, however, consulting the English translations of *Antigone* is not enough to attain a satisfying result. Rather, he seems to recognize that when it comes to poetry, the translator's work is much more complex than what initially seems to be a line-by-line transposition of the text to a new language:

> Verse translation is not all that different from original composition. In order to get a project under way, there has to be a note to which the lines, and especially the first lines, can be tuned. Until this register is established, your words may well constitute a satisfactory semantic equivalent but they cannot induce that blessed sensation of being on the right track, musically and rhythmically. (Heaney 2005: 169)

Although Heaney was not translating *Antigone* from ancient Greek to English but, effectively, from English to *his* English, the above remark about the struggles of verse translation applies very well to *The Burial at Thebes*, which, after all, is a poetic work consisting of different verse metres. Defending his choice to produce a verse translation of *Antigone*, Heaney says in the endnote of *The Burial at Thebes*: "Greek tragedy is as much musical score as it is dramatic script. I wanted to do a translation that actors could speak as plainly or intensely as the occasion demanded, but one that still kept faith with the ritual formality of the original" (*BT*: 79).[52] In order to achieve this, however, Heaney had to look elsewhere than the previous canonical and trustworthy but poetically sterile translations of *Antigone*.

Apparently, the key opening Antigone's door to Heaney came out of the blue: "Then suddenly, as if from nowhere, I heard the note. Theme and tune coalesced. What came to my mind, or more precisely, into my ear, were the opening lines of a famous eighteenth-century Irish poem, called in the original 'Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire'" (2004b: 423). *Caoineadh* is the Irish word for 'keening' and the poem's title is known in English as 'Lament for Art O'Leary'.[53] The poem, a product of oral tradition, is credited to Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, an Irish woman who composed and sung this lament after the killing of her husband Art O'Leary by a Protestant officer.[54] The story goes as follows:

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[52] Given Heaney's demonstrated understanding about the intricacies of verse translation, Michael Parker poignantly notes that: "Until recently little critical attention was paid to Heaney's role as a translator, due in part to the erroneous assumption that such activity was somehow peripheral to his literary project, rather than a significant element within it" (2019: 98).

[53] Angela Bourke gives an illuminating explanation about the significance and the practice of *caoineadh* in Ireland: "'Keening' in English suggests a high-pitched, inarticulate moaning, but the Irish word *caoineadh*, from which it derives signifies among other things, a highly articulate tradition of women's oral poetry. The lamenting woman led the community in a public display of grief. Acting out in her appearance and behaviour the disorder brought about by death, she was often barefoot and dishevelled. Her *caoineadh* or lament was a series of breathless utterances of rhymed, rhythmic praise of the dead person (usually a man), and invective against his enemies" (1988: 287).

[54] Patricia Lysaght mentions that the 'Lament for Art O'Leary' "was written down from oral narration only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and appeared in print for the first time towards the end of that century" (1997:69). Lysaght also explains that "this lament is essentially a structured personal, tribal and communal response to death in the traditional manner. It invites interpretation on a number of levels: it can be read as a public document in response to a public duty, one that is redolent of the political, religious and cultural antagonisms and tensions of eighteenth-century Ireland, and concerned, too, with the cosmic significance of death; but it is also a review of the significant moments of the shared private life of Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill and Art O'Leary (*Ibid*. 73).

> Eibhlin's husband Art O'Leary had refused to sell his fast horse to Abraham Morris, the High Sheriff of Cork. Morris tried to pressure him, and so O'Leary challenged him to a duel. Morris then declared that O'Leary was an outlaw and had his men shoot O'Leary, leaving him on the road to die. Eibhlin Ni Chonaill immediately composed a poem as a lament or keen to his memory that evokes both her love for her husband and her sense of loss, as well as her anger at the state authorities. (Wilmer 2007: 231)

To situate Eibhlín's performance within the wider Irish lament protocol, one of the most detailed accounts of keening comes from J. M. Synge, who, on his visit to the Aran Islands, recorded the mourning ritual:

> While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs. (1911: 64)

To present now the first two stanzas of 'Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire' in Irish, followed by its English translation:

> *Mo ghrá go daingean thú!*
> *Lá dá bhfaca thú*
> *Ag ceann tí an mhargaidh,*
> *Thug mo shúil aire dhuit,*
> *Thug mo chroí taitneamh duit,*
> *D'éalaíos óm charaid leat*
> *I bhfad ó bhaile leat.*
>
> *Is domhsa nárbh aithreach:*
> *Chuiris parlús a ghealadh dhom,*
> *Rúmanna á mbreacadh dhom,*
> *Bácús á dheargadh dhom.*
>
> My love and my delight,
> The day I saw you first
> Beside the markethouse
> I had eyes for nothing else
> And love for none but you.

I left my father's house
And ran away with you,
And that was no bad choice;
You gave me everything.
There were parlours whitened for me,
Bedrooms palmed for me,
Ovens reddened for me. (qtd. in Heaney 2005: 171-2)

Spanning over four hundred lines, the 'Lament for Art O'Leary' is considered the definitive Irish example of this poetic form: involving "an exposition of two journeys by the lamenting woman in question: a private journey through the grief and mourning process, from denial through anger to acceptance of death; and a public journey in her symbolic role as agent of transition and incorporation" (Lysaght 1972: 72). Singing the lament, Eibhlín assumes a dual role: she is both the bereaved wife and the chief mourner of an elaborate death ritual.

Heaney found in the lament of O'Leary's wife an equivalent to Antigone's stance regarding Polyneices: Antigone's position is not only that of a sister mourning a brother, but also that of a custodian of funeral rites, observant of the procedures surrounding Polyneices' burial. In other words, Heaney discovered in the three-beat line of 'Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoghaire' a so-called tuning fork:

> In a flash I saw refracted in Eibhlín Dubh the figure of the stricken Antigone, and heard in the three-beat line of her keen the note that Antigone might strike at the start of the proposed translation. There was no distinction at that moment between the excitement I felt at the discovery of the trimeter as the right metre for the opening and the analogies I could sense between the predicaments of a sister affronted by a tyrant in Thebes and a wife bereft by English soldiery in Carriganimma in County Cork. (2005: 172)

Indeed, Antigone's first utterances in *The Burial at Thebes*, following the three-beat metrical arrangement of the Irish lament, immediately transmit her agony and sense of the injustice felt:

Ismene, quick, come here!
What's to become of us?
Why are we always the ones?
…
Here's what has happened.
There's a general order issued
And again it hits us hardest

The ones we love, it says,
Are enemies of the state.
To be considered traitors. (*BT*: 5)

Antigone's rapid spitting of words afforded by the use of the trimeter is Heaney's way to depict the urgency surrounding her decision to bury Polyneices. Heaney's Antigone speaks piercingly and in short sentences, pressured as she is to perform the illegal burial rites and being aware of the impending dangers of such a mission. The following address to Ismene is exemplary of the determination shown by Antigone to complete the burial deed and redeem Polyneices:

And right you are to be scared.
Creon has made a law.
Eteocles has been buried
As a soldier, with full honours,
So he's gone home to the dead.
But not Polyneices.
Polyneices is denied
Any Burial at all. (*Ibid*. 6-7)
…
There's to be no laying to rest,
No mourning, and the corpse
Is to be publicly dishonoured.
His body's to be dumped,
Disposed of like a carcass,
Left out for the birds to feed on. (*Ibid*. 7)
…
Live, then; and live with your choice.
I am going to bury his body. (*Ibid*. 11)

Antigone's resentment about the lack of mourning concerning Polyneices is somehow answered by the fact that her words are attuned to the Irish lament cadence. This is an indirect way of showing that Antigone is doing the right thing when she ignores Creon's edict and performs the burial rites. The harmony between Antigone's word and deed is Heaney's way of showing where his sympathies lie. By appropriating a distinct Irish metre used in traditional lament songs as the proper voice for his Antigone, Heaney succeeds in Irishizing the Greek heroine, who is transformed into an Irish keener.[55] Correspondingly, when Eurydice storms the stage saying "I

[55] Moments before Antigone is led to her cave prison to await her death, she speaks of herself: "No flinching then at fate. | No wedding guests. No wake. | *No keen*. No panygeric. | I close my eye on the sun. | I turn my

heard keening in the house, and fainted" (*Ibid*. 67), one cannot but imagine an Irish lament being sung. Evidently, Heaney found his own way to 'dress Antigone in green', doing justice to his poetic outlook by searching and finding in the registers of the Irish poetic tradition a compatible voice to Antigone's anguish.

After discovering the appropriate meter for Antigone, Heaney felt it necessary that other important characters in the play should also have their own established tune to enhance certain intrinsic qualities possessed by these characters: "The speeches of the chorus, for example, almost spoke themselves in an alliterating four-beat line, one that echoed very closely the metre of Anglo-Saxon poetry and that seemed right for the enunciation of proverbial wisdom and the invocation of gods" (Heaney 2004b: 425). In the first *stasimon* of *The Burial at Thebes*, known in *Antigone* as the hymn to Victory, the choice of this "gnomic and grim [metre], but capable also of a certain clangour and glamour" (Heaney 2005: 173) manifests itself:

> Glory to be to brightness, to the gleaming sun,
> Shining guardian of our seven gates.
> Burn away the darkness, dawn on Thebes,
> Dazzle the city you have saved from destruction. (*BT*: 13)

This traditional Old English metre fits the role of the vigilant advisor that Heaney wants the Chorus to represent. As for Creon, to bring up the voice of authority, Heaney confesses that "I didn't even bother with a trial run: blank verse it had to be, iambic pentameter, the obvious medium 'to honour patriots in life and death'" (2005: 173). To quote the exact lines that Heaney alludes to:

> This is where I stand when it comes to Thebes:
> Never to grant traitors and subversives
> Equal footing with loyal citizens,
> But to honour patriots in life and death. (*Ibid*. 17)

The use of this more conventional metre befits Creon's devout adherence to tradition and the laws of the state. In fact, Antigone also adopts this particular rhythm by moving "from trimeter towards pentameter in her final heroic utterances. Her final moments, before going to her death, gain a sense of grandeur and formality, which is appropriate for facing her voyage to Hades" (Pitman-Wallace 2019: 73). Here are some of these lines:

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back on the light" (*BT*: 53; italics mine). By using the designated lament trimeter to refer to the expected absence of keening following her death, Antigone indirectly dedicates a lament song to herself. Apart from doing this job for Polyneices, Antigone ends up being her own keener.

> Stone of my wedding chamber, stony of my tomb,
> Stone of my prison roof and prison floor,
> Behind you and beyond you stand the dead.
> They are my people and they're waiting for me
> And when they see me coming down the road
> They'll hurry out to meet me, all of them.
> My father and my mother first, and then
> Eteocles, my brother – every one
> As dear to me as when I washed and dressed
> And laid them out.
> But Polyneices,
> When I did the same for you, when I did
> What people know in their hearts of hearts
> Was right, I was doomed for it. (*BT*: 53-4)

Interestingly, the Guard is the sole character who speaks in prose, with his ranting and candour serving as a source of comic relief for the audience. A notable instance of his bewilderment occurs as he stands before Creon, attempting to explain the disappearance of Polyneices' body:

> Sir, I wouldn't exactly say I was panting to get there. Far from it. As a matter of fact, I was more for turning back. I was over a barrel. One part of me was saying, 'Only a loony would walk himself into this,' and another part was saying, 'You'd be a bigger loony not to get to Creon first.' It was 'You take the high road, I'll take the low road,' then 'What's your hurry?' then 'Get a move on.' But when all was said and done there was only one thing for it: get here, get it out and get it over, no matter what. So here I am, the old dog for the hard road. What will be, says I, will be. (*Ibid*. 19)

Besides the scene's comic overtones, the Hiberno-English vernacular used by the Guard is possibly the most obvious indication that the happenings of *The Burial at Thebes* have an Irish resonance.

To recapitulate, the didactic lyricism of the Chorus, Creon's sombre parlance, Antigone's short but powerful pleas, and the Guards' Irish slang, are either afforded by different metrical verses or, in the Guard's case, by the lack of one. Each metre used serves a different purpose for Heaney, as the characterization of his protagonists depends greatly on their locution. To strengthen this point, Remoundou-Howley notes that in *The Burial at Thebes* the "alternate beat register defines opposing speech acts: when Ismene and the Chorus express sympathy and solidarity with Antigone, they use her meter, while even Creon reverts from iambic pentameter to

the three-beat line in his repenting final scene" (2011: 297).[56] The significance of this final observation is indeed crucial in determining the ultimate outcome of *The Burial at Thebes*. To cite one of these characteristic passages, where a penitent Creon adopts Antigone's metre:

> Why doesn't somebody take
> A two-edged sword to me?
> The dark is on me too.
> I'm at bay in guilt and grief. (*BT*: 72)

Creon expresses genuine remorse not just through the words he selects but also by adopting Antigone's manner of speech. Creon embraces the three-beat line of Antigone originally taken from Eibhlín's lament, and this way he indirectly concedes that Polyneices deserved to receive the funeral rites denied to him. Also minding Creon's earlier sacrilegious talk that "If people had the chance to keen themselves | Before they died, they'd weep and wail forever" (*Ibid*. 53), the fact that he ends up appropriating the keening melody makes his change of mind even more astonishing and dramatic. Thus, by making Creon talk like Antigone, Heaney finds a subtle way of acquitting the Greek heroine, whose willingness to pay respect to Polyneices transgressed the laws of the state.

Overall, what can be noted about Heaney's writing strategy in *The Burial at Thebes* is the poet's deep investment in poetic language and metrics. To produce his own version of *Antigone*, Heaney had to first look for that three-beat line from the 'Lament for Art O'Leary' and then build the rest of the play around it. Similarly, the sought Irishness of *The Burial at Thebes* is placed within the fabric of Heaney's poetic language. The intrinsic connection between Irish lament and Antigone's grief as well as the final vindication of Antigone may not be explicitly stated, yet they are traceable to someone who comprehends the nuances of Heaney's poetic discourse.

[56] Neil Corcoran highlights that the same happens with the Guard: "the 'guard' - the Irish word for 'policeman' - is particularly Irish in idiom and accent, and is also (wittily) elevated from low-life prose to more heroic blank verse when he steels himself to rebuke Creon and then pityingly hauls Antigone before him" (2004).

The Emperor's New Clothes: Creon as George W. Bush's Alter Ego

As stressed before, a central theme of *The Burial at Thebes* is the commentary it provides on contemporary international political events. The supposed association of *The Burial at Thebes* with world politics is crucial for the critical reception of Heaney's play not only because it enhances the applicability of the Antigonean thematics, but also because it serves as a differentiating factor from other Irish versions of the Greek tragedy. Heaney's *Antigone* is a play that actively engages with the key global affairs of its day and does not falter to assume a clear-cut position in relation to them. Specifically, Heaney focuses on the figure of Creon to offer an acute critique of present-day hegemony, simultaneously exposing the demagogic practices sustaining it.

Given the time of its production, many critics have attempted to associate Heaney's play with a variety of personalities and places that dominated the news at the turn of the 21st century. To this end, McGuire argues that while critics disagree on the political crises addressed in *The Burial at Thebes*, there is a general consensus that these events unfolded far from the Irish border:

> *The Daily Telegraph*'s Dominic Cavendish compared the politics of Heaney's Creon to those of Tony Blair. *The Financial Times*'s Sarah Hemming saw in the set 'the shell-pocked walls of today's Middle East,' and in *The Times* Benedict Nightingale read 'the vaguely Islamic robes' as a gesture toward 'Iran or Saudi Arabia or even Iraq.' Such readings were encouraged by the decisions of the play's initial directors – the Canadian Lorraine Pintal (Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 2004) and the London-born Lucy Pitman- Wallace (Nottingham Play House, 2007) – regarding set design, background music, and costumes.[57] They also reflect the distance, both literally and metaphorically, of the cities in which it was staged from the political machinations being played out in post-Troubles Northern Ireland. (2017: 290-1)

Although the reviewers seem to reach different conclusions as to who is the recipient of Heaney's censure, the professed international scope of *The Burial at Thebes* is hardly denied. What is at stake seems to overcome Ireland and its usual tribulations. Characteristically, Anthony Roche hints that with this play Heaney "looks out to address a world where the threat is much more global than just the ancient enemy on the neighbouring island" (2020: 15). Correspondingly, Eugene McNulty develops the following reasoning about Heaney's ultimate objective in *The Burial at Thebes*:

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[57] Lorna Hardwick lambasts the costume choices and scenography of the first production: "when the play was staged at the Abbey, audiences were very conscious of a disjunction between Heaney's text and the production, directed by the Quebecoise Lorraine Pintal. Creon was costumed and played as a white-uniformed, red-sashed Latin American-style dictator amidst a brutalist set design that gave little sense of the House of Thebes" (2006: 213).

> Heaney largely refuses the more obvious temptations of an over-determined and reductive localization of the myth. By refusing to be limited by the contours of a specific *history* (most obviously the events of the Northern Irish Troubles) Heaney confronts his audience with a play intent on exploring the motors of *History*, those ideological engines - the will to power, the rise of the State, the construction and policing of communal boundaries - that drive change over time and birth those relational events we think of as history. (2015: 112)

Heaney had to discover anew how a Greek tragedy like *Antigone* could be historically and culturally pertinent on a global scale. Asked by Eileen Battersby if there was a new sense of the play's relevance after September 11, Heaney admits that "There was the general worldwide problem where considerations of state security posed serious threats to individual freedom and human rights" (2004). Within this new milieu, Heaney seems more interested in exposing the overall workings of hegemony and state control as they manifest themselves in public discourse rather than offering a site-specific critique.

Yet, as with *Philoctetes* and its organic linking to the Troubles, Heaney needed an external stimulus to tackle *Antigone*. This is something that he touches on in the endnote of *The Burial at Thebes*:

> Early in 2003, the situation that pertains in Sophocles' play was being reenacted in our 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. Creon puts it to the Chorus in these terms: Either you are a patriot, a loyal citizen, and regard Antigone as an enemy of the state because she does honour to her dead brother, or else you yourselves are traitorous because you stand up for a woman who has broken the law and defied my authority. And Bush was using a similar tragedy, asking, in effect: Are you in favour of state security or are you not? If you don't support the eradication of this tyrant in Iraq and the threat he poses to the free world, you are on the wrong side in the 'war on terror' (*BT*: 76).[58]

Remarkably, it is not for Antigone but for Creon that Heaney finds a fitting counterpart. Also, contrary to the suggestions of some critics, the central focus in *The Burial at Thebes* is pretty clear: George W. Bush and his aggressive politics against Iraq, reminding Heaney of Creon's absolutism

[58] Heaney expands this argumentation in a lecture given at the American Philological society the same year: "If you were not for state security to the point that you were ready to bomb Iraq, you could be represented as being in favour of terrorism. If you demurred at the linking of Al Qaeda to the despotism of Saddam Hussein, you were revealing yourself as unsound on important issues, soft on terrorism. If you demurred at the suspension of certain freedoms, you were unpatriotic" (2004b: 421).

as head of state in Thebes.[59] As we will see, the ideological mechanisms justifying the US expedition in Iraq – grouped together under the label 'war on terror' – are traceable in Creon's proclamations and mannerisms. Heaney replicates Bush's black-or-white rhetoric by making Creon use the same sort of phraseology when it comes to questions of power and dominance.

The audience's first indirect contact with Creon is through Antigone, who conveys his threats to Ismene in the first person:

> 'I'll flush 'em out,' he says.
> 'Whoever isn't for us
> Is against us in this case.
> Whoever breaks this law,
> I'll have them stoned to death.' (*Ibid*. 7)

Conspicuously similar to Creon's "I'll flush 'em out", George Bush notoriously declared about the Taliban that 'We'll smoke 'em out' (Kellner 2007: 626). Moreover, as Biljana Vlašković Ilić first observed, the above passage is reminiscent of "Bush's demagogic, at times tyrannical-sounding speeches, like his address to a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001" (2017: 143), where Bush declares to the rest of the world that anyone not aligning with him in the newly declared 'war on terror' will automatically be considered an enemy:

> This war will not be like the war against Iraq a decade ago, with a decisive liberation of territory and a swift conclusion. It will not look like the air war above Kosovo two years ago, where no ground troops were used and not a single American was lost in combat. Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success. We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. *Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists*. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. (qtd. in Ilić 2017: 143; italics mine).

[59] The same year as the US invasion in Iraq and one year before the staging of *The Burial at Thebes*, a collective volume of poetry and prose was published entitled *Irish Writers Against the War* (2003). Heaney contributed to the anthology with a poem. In the preface to the edition, Brian Friel states: "I oppose this war because I just know – every instinct insists – that there is something not thought through about it; something wildly disproportionate about it; something inimical to reason and reasonableness; something, indeed, that offends the notion of what it is to be fully human" (Korstick & Moore 2003: 3).

Heaney has taken the gist of Bush's overly dramatic speech – epitomized by the phrase 'you are either with us or against us' – and has placed it in Creon's mouth. The purposefully simplistic logic behind this statement in truth describes a power relationship where the stronger party, be it Creon or Bush, uses their force to threaten and coerce others. Also, it seems that Bush's somewhat farcical comment that most war operations will be televised did not remain unnoticed by Heaney, as evidenced in the debate between Antigone and Ismene about the future of Polyneices' body, when the latter shouts "Oh, stop! This must never get out" (*BT*: 12), Antigone answers "No. No. Broadcast it." (*Ibid*.). A comparable moment takes place later in the play when Creon ironically asks: "Do my orders come from Thebes and from the people?" (*Ibid*. 45). Such arrogant and audacious demeanour to justify one's power is also encountered in Bush, who, in an interview, once stated: "I'm the commander, see. I don't need to explain — I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation" (qtd. in Woodward 2002: 145-6). Evidently, Heaney's Creon and George W. Bush seem to share the same understanding, showing an identical disregard of the public opinion when it comes to decision-making and the promotion of their agenda.[60]

Unsurprisingly, the vocabulary that Creon uses to address the Theban crowd abounds in Bushisms. By employing a combination of populist remarks and patriotic rhetoric, Creon endeavours to unify and control his subjects. He does so by celebrating the cultural traits that purportedly bind them together, and emphasizing the imminent dangers posed by an unnamed but ostensibly menacing enemy:

> Gentlemen. We have entered calmer waters.
> Our ship of state was very nearly wrecked
> But the gods have kept her safe.
> So, friends, well done.
> You from the start have been a loyal crew.
> …
> But rest assured:
> My nerve's not going to fail, and there's no threat
> That's going to stop me acting, ever,
> In the interest of all citizens. Now would I,
> Ever, have anything to do

[60] Stephen Wilmer correspondingly argues: "Creon's refusal to listen to popular criticism evoked memories of Bush and Blair not listening to the huge demonstrations in London and Dublin against the war, as well as foreshadowing Donald Rumsfeld's announcement, to the applause of US soldiers in Iraq on 13 May 2004, that he was no longer listening to media criticism: 'I've stopped reading newspapers'" (2010: 388).

> With my country's enemy. For the patriot,
> Personal loyalty always must give way
> To patriotic duty.
> Solidarity, friends,
> Is what we need. The whole crew must close ranks.
> The safety of our state depends upon it.
> Our trust. Our friendships. Our security.
> Good order in the city. And our greatness. (*BT*: 16)

Creon tries to emotionally manipulate his audience by launching a bunch of flatteries and adulations to them. Blurring the divide between himself and those under him by calling them "friends" and "gentlemen", Creon speaks like a modern-day politician, who knows how to steer the debate towards his advantage. Commenting on the same passage, Stephen Wilmer is quite convinced about the man standing behind Creon's declarations:

> Creon's language starts to resemble the rhetoric of George Bush in his war on terror. By emphasizing such words as 'patriot', 'patriotic duty', 'patriots in life and death', as well as 'safety' and 'security', Creon's phraseology calls to mind the post-9/11 climate of fear, loyalty (to the government), and vengefulness, which was encouraged by the US president through the adoption of the USA Patriot Act, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. (2007:235)

By excessively extolling the virtues of patriotism, Creon becomes the mouthpiece of Bush's policies. Especially for the original audience of *The Burial at Thebes*, with Bush's public calls to eliminate world terrorism fresh in their minds, Creon's verbal strategies must have sounded eerily familiar. In fact, the patriotism-terrorism dialectic persists in one of Antigone's attacks to Creon, as she reveals that if the Thebans "Weren't so afraid to sound unpatriotic" (*BT*: 32), they would have dared to confront Creon about the impiety done to Polyneices body. Creon, however, remains stubbornly fixed in his position, insisting that Polyneices "terrorized us. Eteocles stood by us" (*Ibid*. 33). His rationale about the two men is unshakable: the one is a saviour, whereas the other a traitor. On and on, Creon furthers a 'Good *versus* Evil' theorem in an attempt to preside over Thebes. Curiously, such binary also happens to be the dominant ideological compass and hegemonic tool championed by George Bush during his double-term presidency in the White House.[61]

[61] Peter Singer's *The President of Good and Evil: The Convenient Ethics of George W. Bush* (2004) is an instructive read deconstructing Bush's black-or-white ideology and his contradictory policies.

Considering all the above cases, the correspondences between Bushian and Creonian politics are too many to be coincidental or go unnoticed. In fact, the depiction of Creon as George W. Bush's alter ego is not only visible in the play, but is also explicitly acknowledged by Heaney himself:

> We were watching a leader, a Creon figure if ever there was one, a law-and-order bossman trying to boss the nations of the world into uncritical agreement with his edicts in much the same way as Creon tries to boss the Chorus of compliant Thebans into conformity with his. With the White House and the Pentagon in cahoots, determined to bring the rest of us into line over Iraq, the disposition and passion of an Antigone were all of a sudden as vital as oxygen masks, so I soon found myself doing a version of the 'wonders chorus' and publishing it as a sort of open letter to George Bush. (Heaney 2005: 170)

The part of *Antigone* that Heaney refers to is the so-called 'Ode on Man' (*Ant.* 332-75), where the Chorus commends the many human achievements that produce dread and wonder (*πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ*). After listing an array of material, social, and spiritual accomplishments that have given shape to human civilization, the Chorus concludes by cautioning that the human race is also capable of the worst disasters and blasphemies, with men crawling from good to evil and back (*μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἐσθλὸν ἕρπει*). Heaney first produced a version of the above Ode under the working title 'Sophoclean' and published it "less than three weeks before hostilities in Iraq began… in both a British-produced anthology, *101 Poems against War*, and in *The New Yorker*" (Parker 2019: 102). With some necessary modifications, the Ode was later included in *The Burial at Thebes*. Here are the last two stanzas, which are the closest in being regarded as an open letter to George Bush:

> Home-maker, thought-taker, measure of all things
> He can heal with herbs and read the heavens.
> Nothing seems beyond him. When he yields to his gods,
> When truth is the treadle of his loom
> And justice the shuttle, he'll be shown respect –
> The city will reward him. But let him once
>
> Overstep what the city allows,
> Tramp down right or treat the law
> Wilfully, as his own word,
> Then let this wonder of the world remember:
> He'll have put himself beyond the pale.
> When he comes begging we will turn our backs. (*BT*: 25)

The Chorus' cautionary words are targeted at Creon, and by extension, George Bush. The message it tries to convey is that arrogance and overestimation of one's powers can prove disastrous, and eventually be subject to punishment. The same person that thinks that nothing is "beyond him", suddenly finds themselves "beyond the pale". With this witty antithesis, Heaney reprimands the tactics of any politician – of this world or mythical – that thinks of their powers as absolute and infinite. For Heaney, George Bush and Creon are of the same breed; wrought by an insatiable desire to control and a disdain for criticism. Yet, Creon's demise serves as a reminder that payback for hubris always comes, one way or another. Hence, if the story of Creon could teach something to the US president, is that one's downfall can be quick and unexpected.

Beyond the Pale and Beyond: Greek Tragedy and Irish Identity on the Cusp of a New World

As demonstrated in the previous section, the thematic considerations of *The Burial at Thebes* go beyond the Irish border, extending to the political machinations played out on the world stage. Via the handling of Antigone's duel with Creon, Heaney proves successful in mirroring the key combat events that were in the forefront at the time *The Burial at Thebes* was staged. Accordingly, the dominant polarizing narratives of the post-9/11 world resonate vigorously throughout the play. Still, it would be misleading to think of *The Burial at Thebes* as an international tragedy *per se*. Rather, as this analysis attempted to illustrate, it is an Irish play that refuses to limit itself solely to Irish matters. In this final section, a recapitulation of this contention will be provided to underscore Heaney's mastery in intertwining the Greek tragedy of *Antigone* with reflections on Irish identity and the broader implications of particular distressing wartime events on a global scale, all set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world.

An effective way to illustrate how Heaney's play never loses touch with its Irish orientation is by highlighting the dual layers of meaning inherent in specific crucial phrases. As we saw earlier, the Chorus indirectly referred to Creon as "putt[ing] himself beyond the pale" (*BT*: 25). This is a phrase that in everyday English connotes someone whose actions lie outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. However, such phrase has also a distinct Irish provenance. Before explaining further, it is important to note that the phrase occurs two more times in the theatrical text. On both occasions it is introduced by Creon, who, referring to Antigone, he blasts:

> When she defied the general order
> Antigone had already gone too far,
> But flaunting that defiance in my face
> *Puts her beyond the pale*. Who does she think
> She is? The man in charge?
> …
> There's no blood on my hands here. It was she
> *Who put herself beyond the pale*. She is to blame
> For every blackout stone they pile up round her. (*Ibid*.: 25, 53; italics mine)

One could attribute to the phrase in question its usual meaning: Creon thinks of Antigone's conduct as simply intolerable, justifying his decision to punish her on those grounds and acquitting himself from all blame. To an Irish audience, however, Antigone's positioning 'beyond the pale' could also be understood in a literal way. As Anthony Roche explains:

> the Pale refers to a specific area of the island of Ireland, 'that eastern strip running from Dundalk to Dublin', as Roy Foster describes it. The rest of the country—by far the greater part of it—was, therefore, beyond the Pale. The term is not just geographic but metaphoric and political. It gained particular force during the Elizabethan period in referring to the area most associated with British rule. The centre of English colonial practice in Ireland was Dublin, on the eastern seaboard, located in the administrative centre, Dublin Castle. The area which came most directly under not only England's rule but its social practices, customs and language was the Pale. The other provinces of Ireland were beyond this rule and associated instead with the irrational, the wild, the ungovernable, as represented in the survival of Gaelic social practices and the Irish language. As Foster puts it, 'the Elizabethan mind found the native Irish [...] incomprehensible, and rapidly took refuge in the analysis of barbarism'.[62] (2020: 16-17)

Antigone's portrayal in *The Burial at Thebes* is inextricably linked to the Pale's signification and its geographic coordinates. Antigone's transgressive behaviour takes place in "a wild and unaccountable area where anything might happen" (Wilmer 2007: 234), far away from the claws of English jurisdiction in Ireland. In truth, Creon abhors Antigone not so much for the crime she has committed, but because he cannot control her. By being situated beyond the Pale, Antigone is in a position to decide for herself which course of action she will take. Accordingly, Antigone's determination to rebel against Creon and bury Polyneices is automatically infused with Irish relevance, understood as a form of resistance against an external oppressor. Thus, with the strategic introduction of certain geopolitical colourings, Heaney succeeds in keeping intact the local Irish relevance of his play, no matter the numerous instances where his critical eye seems fixed to incidences that are occurring overseas.

To conclude, what can be said about *The Burial at Thebes* as a whole is the notional affinity that Heaney establishes between Greek tragedy, Irish identity, and what one could name 'current history'. First, we saw how Heaney juxtaposed Sophocles' *Antigone* with the Irish lament practices and the wider Irish rituals surrounding death. Antigone's grief for the death and unburied status of her brother Polyneices was coupled by the funeral rites and the keening of the dead, as these are manifested in exemplary Irish lament songs like the 'Lament for Art O'Leary'. Additionally, the consideration of the contested burial of the hunger striker Francis Hughes not only served as a

[62] In his influential essay 'Civilians and barbarians', Seamus Deane provides further information about the prevalence of the civilization/barbarism dialectic in Anglo-Irish relations: "The language of politics in Ireland and England, especially when the subject is Northern Ireland, is still dominated by the putative division between barbarism and civilization. Civilization still defines itself as a system of law; and it defines barbarism (which, by the nature of the distinction, cannot be capable of defining itself), as a chaos of arbitrary wills, a Hobbesian state of nature. But it is a distinction which operates within a modern state system which prides itself on the transparency of the whole population to the concentrated stare of bureaucratic (including police and military) control. In Ireland, this new situation (dating from the early nineteenth century) has enormously increased the ideological rift between the competing discourses of the civilian and the barbarian" (1985: 39).

tangible re-enactment of Antigone's duel with Creon, but also underlined the evergreen importance of the handling of the dead in Irish culture. Specifically, we explored how close-knit is the Irish sense of self with the way the community chooses to pay its respects to the dead. Burial is both a familial and public affair in Ireland, and Heaney's reception of Antigone's story prompted by the events in Toomebridge attests to this. By the same token, Heaney's amalgamation of the Irish *dúchas* with Antigone's devotion to "Justice dwelling deep | Among the gods of the dead" (*BT*: 29) is characteristic of how ingrained to the Irish morals and customs *The Burial at Thebes* is. All in all, what the above analysis sought to exhibit is that Heaney's adaptation of *Antigone* cannot be appreciated in depth, without the accompanying detection and investigation of all topical Irish allusions, embedded in the theatrical text or extratextual.

Yet, the reciprocal association between Greek tragedy and Irish identity coexists with another major theme running through *The Burial at Thebes*. To acquire a complete overview of Heaney's play, one must also read it as a political commentary on the global hegemonic practices of its day. Having emerged at the post-9/11 era, at a time when global relations were drastically changing and the dawn of an unpredictable new millennium was suddenly felt, *The Burial at Thebes* offered a critique on Western hegemony, as personified in George W. Bush. Using Creon as Bush's alter ego, Heaney succeeds to reiterate the abusive black-or-white rhetoric of the US president, particularly notable during the American expedition in Iraq. By adapting Antigone to the setting of the Iraq War and endowing Creon with Bush-like characteristics, Heaney delivers a contemporary cautionary tale about the exercise of power and its limits. This way, *The Burial at Thebes* does not falter to take part in the political debates of its epoch, assuming a clear-cut position against the Western intervention in Middle East. Within this framework, Heaney's reception of *Antigone* serves another purpose: it solidifies the role of Greek tragedy as a means of commenting on the unfolding political developments on a global scale.

CHAPTER III

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*: A Very Irish Play Written in Greek

The Curious Case of Hester Swane: An Irish Sister of Medea

Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* was first staged at the Abbey Theatre on 7 October 1998, as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. It is Marina Carr's most well-known and frequently performed play to date. The play unfolds in the imaginary Bog of Cats, with a scenography that reflects the rural Midlands of Ireland.

Hester Swane, the play's protagonist, hails from Irish Traveller heritage. With no present father figure, Hester's only recollections are of her mother, Big Josie, who abandoned her as well, forcing Hester to come of age in solitude. Now in her forties and completely forsaken, Hester shares her life with Carthage Kilbride, her long-time partner of ten years. For most of this time, they lived in a caravan by the bog, embracing a Traveller lifestyle. However, recently, they relocated to a house that Carthage built for them, embarrassed as he was for not following the community's etiquettes. Yet, Hester has never felt comfortable within it, preferring an outdoor way of life to being confined indoors. Together they have a seven-year-old daughter, Josie. Even though they are raising a child together, the couple has chosen not to marry, a decision that ultimately leaves Hester vulnerable, as it allows Carthage the opportunity to leave her and marry another woman. In fact, from the outset of the play we learn about Carthage's plan to wed Caroline Cassidy, the daughter of Xavier Cassidy, who conveniently happens to be a rich farmer and prosperous landowner. This marriage would solidify Carthage as a respected member of the Midlands community, while Hester, as a Traveller, would continue to be viewed as an outsider by the local Irish society.[1] Yet, troubles for Hester do not halt at this point. On the eve of his wedding, Carthage approaches Hester and orders her to leave Bog of Cats, asserting that her presence poses a threat to the entire community. Carthage also declares that their daughter, Josie, will stay in his

[1] Hester is not really an Irish name. Phonetically it somewhat resembles the old French word 'estranger', which means 'to make strange' or 'to treat someone as stranger'. Hester is also the first name of the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Just like Hester Swane, Hester Prynne is a single mother raising her daughter alone, facing public humiliation and shame by the puritanical Boston society because of the unknown parentage of her child.

custody. He claims that now that he has a stable life, he can provide better parenting than her, accusing Hester of heavy drinking and night roaming around the bog.

Hester does not give in to these threats but instead decides to retaliate against her ostracization. She defends her position within the Bog of Cats, and essentially warns Carthage that if she gets expelled, both she and their daughter will face dire consequences. During their heated verbal exchange, it is also revealed that in the past, Hester and Carthage conspired in the death of Hester's brother, Joseph, a character that appears in the form of a ghost in the play. However, their motivations behind the murder were distinct. Carthage's primary interest lay in the money Joseph had inherited from his father, while Hester desired his death as a form of revenge for the favoritism Big Josie had shown toward him.

Joseph is one amongst the numerous grotesque and 'unrealistic' characters in *By the Bog of Cats*. These characters include the Catwoman, a blind pagan figure with sorcery and fortune-telling abilities bearing resemblance to the seer Teiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. Also, there is Father Willow, an eccentric priest with a fondness for women and drink, and Ghost Fancier, a Grim Reaper figure functioning as a metaphor for Hester's subconscious. As the play progresses, Hester is subjected to recurring verbal abuse from two key characters: Carthage's mother, Mrs. Kilbride, an egotistical and controlling figure, who constantly manipulates her son, and Xavier Cassidy, a greedy landowner, who displays an array of chauvinistic views throughout the play.

In a final attempt to reach a compromise, Hester pleads to be allowed to peacefully stay where she is, promising that she will not interfere with Carthage's wedding in any way. Gradually, one begins to understand the underlying reason why Hester is so stubborn to remain within the Bog of Cats: having never fully accepted her mother's abandonment, Hester still waits for Big Josie's return to the bog. When her plea is once again rejected, and everyone is at the wedding, Hester ignores the constant warnings of her earnest yet ineffectual neighbour Monica and seizes the opportunity to set fire to Carthage's house and livestock.[2] When everyone realizes that she initiated the calamity, Hester first kills Josie, and then takes her own life, cursing Carthage for all the harm he inflicted upon her.

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[2] The name Carthage Kilbride rings several bells: first, it recalls Virgil's *Aeneid* and Aeneas' calamitous affair with Dido, the queen of the city of Carthage. Dido commits suicide after Aeneas abandons her. It is therefore not so difficult to associate Dido's fate with that of Hester's, who also takes her life at the end of the play. Second, Carthage calls to mind Cato the Elder's famous *dictum* during the Third Punic War: *ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam*, i.e. 'Furthermore, I think that Carthage must be destroyed'; a wish, which also proves true for Carr's Carthage. Third, in Frank McGuinness' *Carthagians* (1988), The playwright subtly hints at the ancient conflict between Rome and Carthage to echo the strife between Britain and the Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland. Carthage is Ireland, dominated and destroyed by the British Romans. Lastly, the surname 'Kilbride' works as a pun for 'kill the bride', recalling Glauce's death by Medea's poisonous gift of *peplos*.

Ostensibly a play about Travellers, the Irish land, and rural superstitions, there is a second layer to consider. *By the Bog of Cats* is not the sole Irish play during the latter part of the twentieth century that shares a thematic affinity to Euripides' *Medea*. Carr's play was preceded by Brendan Kennelly's *Euripides' Medea: A New Version* (1988), Desmond Egan's *Medea* (1991), and followed by Tom Paulin's *Euripides' Medea: In a New Version* (2010). Yet, *By the Bog of Cats* happens to be the one that deviates more drastically from the Euripidean source. Whereas Egan ends up with a straight interlingual translation of the ancient Greek text to English, and Kennelly as well as Paulin keep faithful in general terms to the setting, characters and plotline of Euripides' tragedy while limiting themselves to variations in the dialogue, Carr radically transfers the action of the play to a modern environment, that of the Irish Midlands. Notably, there is evidence that Carr managed to camouflage the indebtedness that her play owes to *Medea*. One just needs to consider Carr's genuine astonishment about the audience's *prima facie* reaction after the premiere of *By the Bog of Cats*: "The plot is completely *Medea*. It is surprising how few people picked up on that initially" (qtd. in Ni Anluain 2000: 51).

This unexpected reaction by the original audience of *By the Bog of Cats* begs the following questions: how did a play dealing with female ostracization and filicide, not manage to ring a bell about *Medea*? What is the factor at play obscuring the fact that the eponymous Euripidean tragedy is a subtext of *By the Bog of Cats*? And if the latter apparently retains many components of the ancient tragedy, why did it prove so hard to decipher its classical underpinnings? To examine and understand the extent and function of the classical Greek influence in Carr's play, the following central question arises: is *By the Bog of Cats* primarily an Irish adaptation of the Greek tragedy of *Medea* or, after closer inspection, can we argue that it is a distinct Irish play?[3]

In the following sections, we will thoroughly explore these queries. First, we will identify the thematic similarities between the two plays by examining the parallels between the characters of Medea and Hester. Once this has been established, our focus will shift to the elements within Carr's play that may have hindered the initial audience from recognizing that *By the Bog of Cats* is an adaptation of *Medea*. As it will be demonstrated, Carr's play is deeply immersed in a potent Irish sociocultural context, which effectively conceals the Medean subject matter. This results in an authentically Irish play that does not diminish its Greek tragedy origins in any way.

[3] Also minding that "at the time of the premiere the Abbey Theatre did not publicise the play as a Greek adaptation" (Sihra 2018: 119).

Marina and the Greeks: The Greek Germ in Carr's Dramaturgy

A commonplace in Carr's dramaturgic work is the transposition of what she herself has defined as "the Greek idea of destiny and fate and little escape" (Clarity 1994: 23) to an Irish setting. There is a certain Greek aura in most of Carr's plays, and *By the Bog of Cats* is not an exception to this. In Irish theatre studies, *By the Bog of Cats* is often discussed within Carr's 'Midlands trilogy', alongside *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996). *The Mai* is loosely based on Sophocles' *Electra*, while the plotline of *Portia Coughlan* incorporates elements from the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris. Besides that, there is a handful of subsequent plays with strong classical references: Carr has written *Ariel* (2002), inspired by Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and, more vaguely, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy. *Phaedra Backwards* (2011) is based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and *Hecuba* (2015) is an adaptation of the homonymous Euripidean tragedy.

To offer a glimpse of the Greek tragedy element present in Carr's plays, *Ariel* presents a modern reinterpretation of *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Centred on Agamemnon's obligation to offer his daughter as a sacrifice to appease Artemis, enabling the Greeks to embark on their voyage to Troy, Carr tells the story of Fermoy Fitzgerald, an aspiring politician who decides to sacrifice his daughter Ariel to his 'personal God', blinded by a prophecy that this will bring him success in his political career. In *Phaedra Backwards*, Carr does exactly what the title of her play indicates. Contrary to its Euripidean precursor, it is not Phaedra that falls madly in love with her stepson, but Hippolytus with his stepmother. However, it is not only the sexual desire that is reversed, but also the play's chronological structure: Carr's story begins from where the original tragedy ends, namely the death of Hippolytus, and then moves backward in time until just before Phaedra's death. *Hecuba*, on the other hand, remains faithful to the corresponding Greek text. Set in "the fragile Greek state circa 500 BC" (Carr 2015: x), Carr reanimates the Trojan queen's plight as a captive of the Achaeans. Carr depicts Hecuba as more humane than Euripides. In Carr's version, Hecuba does not blind her son-in-law Polymestor or murder her grandchildren, as she seeks revenge for the death of her youngest son Polydoros.

Considering the strong Greek influences in Carr's plays, Frank McGuinness's concluding verdict in the Abbey's program note to *By the Bog of Cats* seems quite appropriate: "I wonder what Marina Carr believes? I can't say for certain, but I am certain in this play she writes in Greek" (2003: 88). Such bold statement invites one to dig deeper. In fact, given the apparent general inability of the original audience to grasp the play's indebtedness to *Medea*, McGuinness's assertion is not self-evident. What does it mean for an Irish play to be 'written in Greek'?

A good starting point is to inquire the instrumental purposes behind Carr's choice to appropriate the story of a heroine that breaks the ultimate taboo: a mother killing her own child. Filicide, no matter how you examine it, remains inexplicable. Carr must be aware of the

incomprehensibility that filicide generates, regardless of the circumstances it is conducted. For a woman to kill her child, she must be mad, certainly deranged. Especially in Ireland, womanhood is synonymous with being a mother. As Melisa Sihra points out: "Carr's mature plays explore the deep-rooted association of woman and motherhood in Irish culture" (Sihra 2005: 118). This fusion of female experience with maternity has received institutional sanction through articles 41.1 and 41.2 of the 1937 Irish constitution, which reads as follows:

> 41.1: The State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
>
> 41. 2: The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (*Bunreacht na hÉireann - Constitution of Ireland*: p. 160)

This interchangeability between the roles of 'mother' and 'woman' – along with an imperative urge to overcome it – directly informs the contextual framework of *By the Bog of Cats*. Carr's dramaturgical effort is aimed at subverting the prevalent assimilation of 'woman' and 'mother' ingrained in Irish law, and thereby reflecting a notion deeply embedded in Irish consciousness.

To critique this stifling phenomenon for Irish women, filicide becomes a weapon: Carr draws inspiration from the murderous myth of Medea and creates a rebellious female character like Hester Swane, who decisively deviates "from [the] culturally circumscribed role which commands mothers to be caring and nurturing to others, even at the expense of themselves" (Hirsch 1989: 170). Hester Swane struggles to fulfil her maternal role due to her violent exile from her motherland. Carr creates a scenario where the sense of belonging to an Irish Midlands community is inextricably linked to the performance of maternal duties. Hence, *By the Bog of Cats* is a retelling of *Medea*, where the idea of Ireland as motherland becomes inseparable from the idea of motherhood. For Carr, being a mother necessitates having a motherland.

As one can observe, numerous analogies exist between the Euripidean tragedy and Carr's play: like Medea, Hester faces severe social exclusion, and due to a series of wrongs inflicted upon her, she has no choice but to kill her offspring. Hester, much like Medea, is abandoned by her child's father, who is selfishly marrying another woman for financial and social-climbing reasons. Again, similar to Medea, Hester is forced into exile by the community's authorities. Besides, both heroines are seen by others as possessors of sorcery and witchcraft powers. "You're my match in witchery, Hester, same as your mother was, it may even be ya surpass us both", are Catwoman's words to her (*BC*: 11). This statement can be interpreted as an allusion to Creon's expulsion of Medea from Corinth due to her magical abilities: "you are a clever woman, and skilled in many evil arts" (*σοφὴ πέφυκας καὶ κακῶν πολλῶν ἴδρις*) (*Med*. 285). As Hester follows the lead of her

mother in alchemy, so does Medea, who, according to Diodorus, has learned from her mother Hecate[4] and her sister Circe all the powers that drugs possess (*Bibl.* 4.45). According to the same source, when the Argonauts encountered Pelias, Medea volunteered to slay him using the powerful drugs she has brought with her aboard (*Ibid*. 4.50).

Medea and Hester are *pharmakon* (*φάρμακον*) connoisseurs. *Pharmakon* is a Greek word that refers to a potent substance used for either healing or causing harm.[5] Apollonius recounts that Medea equips Jason with a *pharmakon* to anoint himself before clashing with the earthborn men and the fire-breathing bulls, making him virtually invulnerable (*Argon*. 3.1045). In Euripides' tragedy, the exact opposite use of *pharmakon* transpires: Medea's nuptial gifts of golden crown and robe to Glauce are steeped with deadly poison, and when the bride puts them on, she faces a painful death (*Med*. 784-89). In fact, Medea has already declared that her most formidable and deadly skill against her enemies lies in her expertise with poisons (*κράτιστα τὴν εὐθεῖαν, ᾗ πεφύκαμεν σοφοὶ μάλιστα, φαρμάκοις αὐτοὺς ἐλεῖν*) (*Ibid*. 384-5).

Correspondingly, in *By the Bog of Cats*, the Catwoman, the mentor of Hester in hag things, reminds her that "There's ways round curses. Curses only have the power ya allow them" (*BC*: 13), and angrily remembers that once she gave "auld Xavier Cassidy herbs to cure his wife. What did he do? Pegged them down the toilet and took Olive Cassidy to see some swanky medicine man in a private hospital… she came back cured as a side of ham in an oak coffin with golden handles" (*Ibid*.). As Catwoman's pun about cured men and cured meat foregrounds, in Carr's Midlands, the word of the wise women of the bog is valued higher than authorized medicine. Both Catwoman and Hester abide to the so-called 'Hag-ocracy' lineage: the land of the bog is "governed by the Witch within – the Hag within. Like the wise women Biddy Early[6] and Augusta Gregory, Marina

[4] Opinions about Medea's mother differ: "Whereas, in the most recent tradition, Medea's mother is thought to be Hecate, the deity of magic and enchantment, in an older tradition, her mother is presumed to be Idya, an Oceanid. As the daughter of Idya ('the one who knows'), Medea is associated with a beneficent goddess and inherits her discernment and clear-sightedness. As Hecate's daughter, Medea is linked to the powers of darkness as an evil sorceress" (Lecossois 2012: 70).

[5] *Pharmakon* is a term that is still in circulation, especially in post-structuralism. In his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', Jacques Derrida provides a reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, focusing on the passage about Boreas' kidnapping of Orithya, while she was "playing with Pharmacia" (*Phdr*. 229d). Briefly, in *Phaedrus*, Plato describes *logos* (speech) as 'the Father' suggesting its epistemological superiority to writing. To strengthen his argument, Plato introduces the ambivalent word *pharmakon* – both cure and poison – as a metaphor for writing. Writing for Plato is a simulacrum of Truth that, at best, it provides a vehicle for true Ideas to be conveyed. Derrida deconstructs Plato's view suggesting that it is a fallacy to believe that true Ideas such as Beauty or Justice could exist separated from signification in language. For the actual source and a comprehensive analysis see: Derrida (1981) and Rinon (1992).

[6] Biddy Early was a traditional Irish herbalist, who was offering her services free of charge or in exchange of gifts. Until her death in 1874, her fame had spread throughout the island. Though the Catholic Church had condemned her, and trained doctors were disapproving of her unorthodox methods, she was revered for her healing powers. Like Medea, she had learned the art of herbal cures from her mother. It was believed that she could talk to the fairies, and she was always carrying around her neck a small bottle with an

Carr evokes these channels of 'Hag-ocracy' to release and resituate energies from women's perspectives" (Sihra 2018: 282).[7] Similarly, John Millington Synge records in his travel accounts that local women from Wicklow, on the east coast of Ireland, are thought to have "great witchery… [and] great knowledge of the fairies" (1980: 31).

Persisting on the similarities between the two heroines, flying in the skies is another supernatural aspect that binds them together. As it is exhibited by the *deus ex machina* device in Euripides' tragedy, Medea, after she commits filicide, she escapes in the skies with the assistance of her grandfather Helios and the dragon chariot he sends to her. (*Med.* 1321-3). Accordingly, Mrs Kilbride – in a rendition of a familiar stereotype of the witch – claims to have observed Hester "whooshin' by on her broom half an hour back" (*BC*: 8). She also calls Hester "the Jezebel witch" (*Ibid*. 17). Furthermore, the neighbour Monica shares her conviction that Hester is into "black-art things" (*Ibid*. 61). This kind of witch imagery permeates *By the Bog of Cats*, most conspicuously when the Creon-like character Xavier Cassidy, echoing witch-hunt practices commonly associated with the Middle Ages, execrates Hester by saying that "You're a dangerous witch, Swane… A hundred year ago we'd strap ya to a stake and roast ya till your guts exploded" (*Ibid*. 68).[8] Correspondingly, death is also what Creon promises to Medea if she tomorrow remains within the borders of Corinth (*προυννέπω δέ σοι, εἴ σ᾽ ἠ 'πιοῦσα λαμπὰς ὅψεται θεοῦ καὶ παῖδας ἐντὸς τῆσδε τερμόνων χθονός, θανῇ*) (*Med*. 351-4).

Nonetheless, there exist significant differences between the two heroines. For instance, Medea is the mother of two boys, whereas Hester has only a daughter. Additionally, in contrast to Medea, Hester takes her own life following the act filicide. These departures from the classical myth are critical and will be assessed later in more detail. For now, it is more prompting to consider Marianne McDonald's following assertion:

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unspecified dark liquid that she was using for her potion making. Lady Augusta, in her book *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920: 35-69), dedicates a whole section to Biddy Early's life and times.

[7] Olwen Fouéré, the leading actress of Carr's play, when inquired about the powerful women of the bog, she answered: "The Catwoman I regarded very much as a 'real' or local character, who is the midwife or the local witch in the community. I don't know whether those people exist in communities in rural Ireland still. To a certain extent they must. As we know, midwives over the last few centuries were also the healers and the witches. Hester knows that Catwoman tells the truth… The truth in the deepest sense" (Fouéré 2003: 160-71).

[8] Xavier's witch purge rhetoric evokes a real story; the killing of Bridget Cleary by Michael Cleary in County Tipperary on 15 March 1895. Cleary was convinced that his wife had been taken off by fairies, with a changeling left at her place. As Sihra underscores: "A thread of the patriarchal demonisation of woman-as-witch pervades Carr's Midlands plays with references to the ritual humiliation, bodily abuse and murder of unconventional or free-thinking women" (2018: 136). "We'll burn ya out if we have to" (*BC*: 52), is the corresponding threat made to Hester, revealing the normative attitude of the settled community against the unyielding individuality of the Traveller woman.

> Medea knows how important children are to Creon, Aegeus and Jason, so they show her how this is the best way to destroy her husband. The sons are in the image and likeness of their father. When Medea looks at them, she sees Jason. One wonders if Medea would have killed daughters. (2002: 62)

McDonald posits that the principal factor driving the tragedy in Euripides' play is the sex of Medea's children. Both being male, they are primarily identified with their father, Jason. Their death at the hands Medea is orchestrated with this understanding, as it would inflict the biggest blow upon her former lover. Taking this into account, McDonald's contemplation regarding whether the whole Medea story might have unfolded differently had Medea been compelled to take the life of a daughter instead of two sons, appears reasonable. This gives rise to the question of how a Medea-like figure would react if she were to find herself confronted with a daughter 'in the image and likeness of the mother'? *By the Bog of Cats* provides an answer to this. Filicide in Carr's play becomes a mother-daughter thing: Hester has a daughter, Josie, whom she kills.[9] What remains is to determine whether the motives behind Hester's filicide are like those McDonald assigned to Medea, or if the switch in the sex of the murdered child induces a totally different theorizing of filicide in Carr's play.

To find an answer, one must look at the backstory of Carr's heroine: Hester Swane, being an Irish Traveller, belongs to a wandering community that lives in caravans across the Midlands of Ireland, choosing not to settle permanently in any one location. Hester "embodies autochthonous Irishness – mythic, marginalized, and explosive" (Stewart 1999: 1). In fact, Carr confesses that she "chose to make [Hester] a Traveller because Travellers are [Ireland's] national outsiders" (Battersby 2000: 15).[10] This derogatory attitude towards Irish Travellers is

[9] This female-oriented approach must be juxtaposed against a wider spectrum of familial relationships as customarily embodied in the Irish theatrical canon. To quote Maresh's view: "The most prevalent theme running through [Carr's] play is the importance of the bond between mother and daughter, which marks a significant change from Irish drama such as Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, where relationships between women are always circumvented by the playwright's focus on the father-son relationships, or the women's relationships to the men in their lives. The women in *By the Bog of Cats* are more concerned with either losing their children or having been abandoned by their mothers than they are about their husbands or fathers" (2016: 189-90). Such ground-breaking deviation from the Irish canon, founded upon Carr's straightforward foregrounding of the female experience, comes as a positive development to Marry Trotter's sombre remark that in Irish plays "Female characters provide the protagonists with emotional support, a source of conflict, or as sexual interest, but the real attention in the family memory drama centers on the patrilineal relationships" (2000: 165).

[10] In 2017, Travellers were officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group within the Irish State, signalling an end to their longstanding persecution. To quote the statement made by the former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny: "It is a historic day for our Travellers and a proud day for Ireland. Out Traveller community is an integral part of our society for over a millennium, with their own distinct identity – a people within our people. We recognise the inequalities and discrimination that the Traveller community faces" (O' Halloran & O'Regan: 2017).

substantiated by the repeated use of the term 'tinker'.[11] In short, Hester is being rejected by the settled Midlands community solely on the grounds of her 'gipsy status'. Mrs. Kilbride's statement that "I warned him about that wan, Hester Swane, that she'd get her claws in, and she did, the tinker" (*BC*: 17), comprises the anathema against Hester. Mrs. Kilbride also regards Travellers of inferior intelligence: "Thick and stubborn and dangerous wrong-headed and backwards to top it all" (*Ibid*. 15), only to be granted a fast quip: "It's not backwards, it's inside out" (*Ibid*. 17). Accordingly, Hester does not hesitate to embrace the tinker term: "Thinks yees all Hester Swane with her tinker blood is gettin' no more that she deserves" (*Ibid*. 6), a statement reflecting her raging about the apathy shown by the townsfolk when the news of her banishment from the community breaks out. Overall, "Hester as woman, Traveller-woman and Bog-woman is excluded triply" (Jordan 2002: 251). Yet, Hester does not back down; she firmly defies her triple liminal condition, since she apprehends gender and cultural differences not in terms of hierarchy but of complementarity. Rendered as Other by the settled community, she fights off such Otherness by promulgating an elucidation of it that does not abide to any hierarchical structures of 'above' and 'below', but proposes instead an interdependent model of 'inside' and 'outside'.[12]

Such discrimination between first and second category citizens reminds one of Jason's aggressive reprimand to Medea that she is now living among Greeks, and not in a land of barbarians (*πρῶτον μὲν Ἑλλάδ᾽ ἀντὶ βαρβάρου χθονὸς γαῖαν κατοικεῖς*) (*Med*. 536-7). And as for what mostly divides the two worlds – the Greek from the barbaric – is, according to Jason, the ability to comprehend justice and the rule of law, with no appeal to force (*καὶ δίκην ἐπίστασαι νόμοις τε χρῆσθαι μὴ πρὸς ἰσχύος χάριν*) (*Ibid*. 537-8). He also exclaims to Medea in respect of the murder of their children that "there is no Greek woman that would have dared this" (*οὐκ ἔστιν ἥτις τοῦτ᾽ ἂν Ἑλληνὶς γυνὴ*) (*Ibid*. 1339). In a somewhat reverse but complementary fashion, Hester distinguishes herself from her enemies by appealing to her 'tinker blood', which unmistakably references a distinct set of values that differentiate Irish Travellers from the cultural norms of mainstream society: "And as for me tinker blood, I'm proud of it. It gives me an edge over

[11] The word is derived from the old Irish *Tinceard* signifying 'tin craft'. Initially, a 'tinker' was a wandering craftsman earning his living by fixing small utensils. Nowadays, a tinker denotes somebody who lives an unsettled life. The fascination that Irish writers have had with the tinker lifestyle cannot be understated: as the title of his play suggests, Synge's *The Tinker's Wedding* deals with the wedding plans and subsequent mayhem of two Irish tinkers, whereas his protagonist in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy Mahon, also follows a wandering life. For more information on the impact of Synge's tinker plays to Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* see: Roche (2009b) and Russell (2006).

[12] Mary King suggests that the settled community's "driving objective is to exorcise [Hester], as tinker and bastard-producing Other, from their lives and from what they claim is now 'their' land. She is the liminal Stranger over against whom they define, and viciously defend, their difference from all that is unsettled and unsettling" (2003: 56).

all of yees around here, allows me see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are" (*BC*: 27).

Hester navigates cultural distinctions as a blend of insider and outsider; while she is not entirely foreign to the Midlands community like the non-Greek Medea is to Corinth, she still faces considerable marginalization, living on the outskirts of acceptance. Hence, another fundamental difference between the two heroines comes to light: Medea left Colchis and cut off her familial ties of her own accord, hoping to 'become' Greek. On the contrary, Hester does not strive for assimilation; instead, she insists that her identity as a Traveller be acknowledged. Overall, in Euripides you have two clear-cut civilizations and countries at play – the native Greek and the extraneous Colchian – whereas in *By the Bog of Cats* there is only one confined land and country, that of rural Ireland, that is contested by two local yet antagonizing native groups, namely the settled population and the Traveller people perceived as domestic outsiders.[13] Nonetheless, in both respective cases, the two female protagonists, Hester and Medea, are part of the 'weaker' group, be it endogenous gipsy or alien barbaric, and are accordingly portrayed as either possessing or lacking certain cultural signifiers, ghettoizing them from the established societal *status quo*, be it agrarian Irish or the *polis* of Corinth.

[13] As Lojek observes: "The name 'Traveller' itself is a reminder that one thing separating Travellers from the settled community is their relationship to space" (2011: 69-70).

Medea as *ἄπολις*: A non-Greek in Corinthian Land

From the outset of Euripides' *Medea*, the concept of 'Land' proves integral to Medea's identity. To be more precise, it is the profound absence of 'Land' that decisively informs Medea's idea of self. 'Landlessness' appears to be a pivotal aspect in the moulding of Medea's character, as corroborated in the famous address of Medea to the Chorus of Corinthian women (*Med. 214*-65), to whom she enumerates her misfortunes and explains her present exile, begging them for compassion in the name of their shared femininity: "Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate" (*πάντων δ΄ ὅσ΄ ἔστ΄ ἔμψυχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει γυναῖκές ἐσμεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν*) (*Ibid*. 230).

Having first invoked the Corinthian Chorus in terms of a supposed innate affinity based upon a shared female experience, Medea proceeds to detail the various injustices that women conventionally endure at the hands of men: men become the despots of women's bodies (*δεσπότην τε σώματος*) (*Ibid*. 233), the happiness of a woman solely depends on whether the allotted man turns out to be of a good or a bad character (*ἢ κακὸν λαβεῖν ἢ χρηστόν*) (*Ibid*. 235-6), divorce or refusing a wedlock are not an option (*οὐ γὰρ εὐκλεεῖς ἀπαλλαγαὶ γυναιξὶν οὐδ΄ οἵόν τ΄ ἀνήνασθαι πόσιν*)(*Ibid*. 236-7), and women must get fast accustomed to the new customs and practices of their husbands' homes, otherwise death is preferable (*ἐς καινὰ δ΄ ἤθη καὶ νόμους ἀφιγμένην δεῖ μάντιν εἶναι. εἰ δὲ μή, θανεῖν χρεών*) (*Ibid*. 238-43).

The culmination of Medea's address to the Corinthian women entails the most fundamental biological difference between men and women: giving birth. Medea tries to win over the female Chorus by admitting that it is three times easier to stand in battle holding a shield, like men do, than for a woman giving birth once (*ὡς τρὶς ἂν παρ΄ ἀσπίδα στῆναι θέλοιμ΄ ἂν μᾶλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἅπαξ*) (*Ibid*. 250-1). Yet, Medea's universalizing speech about the common hardships of being a woman becomes interrupted by the confession that she does not share the same story as the female Chorus (*ἀλλ΄ οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸς πρὸς σὲ κἄμ΄ ἥκει λόγος*) (*Ibid*. 252). Medea protests that she was taken as booty from a foreign land and that she is alone, stateless, shamed by her own man, having no mother, no brother, no relative to shield her from such calamity (*ἐγὼ δ΄ ἔρημος ἄπολις οὖσ΄ ὑβρίζομαι πρὸς ἀνδρός, ἐκ γῆς βαρβάρου λελῃσμένη, οὐ μητέρ΄, οὐκ ἀδελφόν, οὐχὶ συγγενῆ μεθορμίσασθαι τῆσδ΄ ἔχουσα συμφορᾶς*) (*Ibid*. 255-58).

The key term to understand Medea's predicament is *ἄπολις* (*apolis*).[14] To be *ἄπολις* means to exist without a city, without lawfully belonging inside the dominion of an organized state. In

[14] The use of alpha privative to denote absence or negation is widely discussed by Edith Hall (1996) in her commentary of Aeschylus' *Persians*. Hall pinpoints the numerous occasions in the tragic text, where the barbarians talk about themselves using words starting with an alpha privative. This is a method introduced by Aeschylus to indirectly exhibit certain Greek attributes that are denied or absent from the Persian foe. Naturally, such strategy aims at highlighting the apparent superiority of Greek values and the deficiency of

essence, this term conveys a state of not having a specific land as a point of reference. Medea is *ἄπολις* because she has been seized from her barbarian motherland, as the phrase *ἑκ γῆς βαρβάρου λελῃσμένη* suggests. In this regard, Stephen Wilmer underscores the two primary aspects of Medea that should be considered in an effort to empathize with her: "The clue lies in Medea's oppressed status as an outsider and a victim" (2005:139). Medea garners our sympathy as a foreigner, making her an easy target. Even after committing the crime, the primary criticism directed at her revolves around Medea's savage origins. Jason's cursing radiates this: "I am in my mind now; but I was mad before, when I brought you from your house and your barbarous land into a Greek home" (*ἐγὼ δὲ νῦν φρονῶ, τότ᾽ οὐ φρονῶν, ὅτ᾽ ἐκ δόμων σε βαρβάρου τ᾽ ἀπὸ χθονὸς Ἕλλην᾽ ἐς οἶκον ἠγόμην*) (*Med*. 1329-31).

The misfit identity of Medea is encapsulated in the lines quoted above, which are the gist of Medea's current situation as a barbarian woman enmeshed in a strange, unwelcoming environment. This unfavourable scenario could simply be coined as the 'Medean condition'. The hardships that Medea experiences stem from her transition from a familiar to an unfamiliar place. It is the sense of belonging to a motherland and the deprivation of such feeling that acutely reflects Medea's condition and tortures her. Remarkably, Medea acknowledges the significance of belonging to a *πόλις* only when she brings her native land to memory. For Medea, the concepts of belonging to a city and having a motherland function simultaneously and interchangeably. With these two notions now separated, Medea realizes that, unlike the Corinthian women, the ground beneath her feet is not her native soil, and she fears the consequences of this disparity. Consequently, when Medea suggests to the female Chorus that, despite the many similarities between them, they have different stories, she primarily alludes to the differing standing they hold in relation to the land of Corinth. Corinth is not her *πόλις*, and this fact shapes her identity and sketches her self-image as an outsider. Medea feels powerless because she is landless.

A longstanding argument in classical scholarship regarding Medea's filicide is that all calamity stems from the moment Medea decides to become a 'bad woman' (Webster 1967: 13-14, 31-101), and frees herself from the 'feminine' domain of *οἶκος* to intrude the 'masculine' domain of *πόλις* (Shaw 1975: 255-6). In fact, when Medea appears in front of the Corinthian women, she proclaims that "I have come out of the house" (*ἐξῆλθον δόμων*) (*Med.* 214). Such statement "can be read symbolically as well as literally, as a movement from the private sphere of the house into the public one - normally associated with men - of the city" (Williamson 1990: 16). Medea's motion from 'inside' to 'outside' is central in the unfolding of the tragedy. As Easterling argues, "since men cannot dispense with women, they try to control their more dangerous aspects by

their enemies. The extended use of alpha privative when describing the barbarians and their customs does not primarily highlight what the Persians *lack*, but more importantly, what the Greeks *possess*.

secluding them inside the house, limiting their emergence into the wider public world in carefully defined ways" (1987: 15). For women, *οἶκος* represents a domain of external control and confinement.

Medea, though, is a character who comprehends and exploits this spatial division for her own advantage. One only needs to consider "Medea's frenzied, angry, and unhappy words offstage in *οἶκος* and her controlled, abstract, intellectualizing language outside the *οἶκος*, a form of speaking which ancient audiences and today's readers have difficulty separating from the speech of the Greek males in the play" (Lloyd 2006: 116). Medea not only understands the rules of the game, but also demonstrates sophistication in defying them and evading the consequences. In this context, Medea's filicide could be interpreted as a warning of the potentially disastrous consequences when the boundary between *οἶκος* and *πόλις* is breached. Medea severely violates this constrain imposed on her, and the act of killing of her two children must be viewed as a result of this unlawful transgression.[15]

Contrary to this theorization, Carr challenges the binary division between *οἶκος* and *πόλις* by creating a heroine who adopts a unique spatial perspective:

> Hester's association mainly with open or unfixed spaces seems to suggest a whole reconceptualization of the notion of home/homeland for female characters. This new idea moves on from a restrictive notion of indoors as a 'natural space' for women characters, and embraces placelessness and displacement not as the absence of place or as the wrong place, but as an alternative kind of 'placement'. (Cerquoni 2003: 182)

Hester, compared to Medea, enjoys a unique position as to what amounts as outward and inward, public and private, political and domestic, masculine and feminine. For Hester, home is not defined by a house but by a stretch of land beside the bog. The bog – as an 'outer realm' – and her Traveller identity – qualifying her as a legitimate proprietor of that external space – cause Hester to adopt a proactive stance towards decision-making, without this to be automatically considered a breach of somebody else's traditional sphere of influence, as is the case with Medea. Living in a caravan without a permanent home does not automatically imply that Hester does not belong anywhere or that she is unrooted like Medea. Crossing spatial and symbolic boundaries, Hester calls home all the land that she roams about and inhabits.

[15] One needs to consider the social role of the Great Dionysia, which involved the portrayal of startling events like Medea's tragic act of killing her sons. This was a significant aspect of Greek civic life, reflecting the democratic ideology of fifth-century Athens. For a concise exploration of the relationship between the festival of Dionysia and Athenian citizenship see: Cartledge (1997). For a revisionist account regarding the institutional framework of Great Dionysia as part of the *polis* ideology and Athenian identity see: Rhodes (2003).

Evidently, the concept of 'Land' plays a significant role in both plays. The distinct (non)relationship that Medea and Hester maintain with their respective lands of Corinth and Ireland is the catalyst for their estrangement from the local population, and ultimately leads to the acts of violence they perpetrate. Medea, being viewed as a foreigner in Corinth, lacks any substantial ties to the land. This forces her to rely on her wit and cunning to navigate the challenges she faces. In contrast, Hester, originally from the Irish Midlands, lives a nomadic life, constantly moving from place to place and lacking a stable home. Her resistance to confinement sets her apart from the settled inhabitants of the Bog of Cats. As a result, a significant similarity between Medea and Hester becomes apparent in their mutual experience of alienation from the traditional societal norms linked to the respective lands they set foot in:

> Just as Medea will always be a foreigner in Corinth, Carr reveals how her central female protagonist will always be excluded from the dominant fabric of Irish society: as a marginalized indigenous people whose language and traditions can be traced as far back as the twelfth century, Irish Travellers are commonly associated with bigoted stereotypes of ignorance, violence and lack of cleanliness, perpetuating essentialist notions of innate impurity. (Sihra 2005: 128)

Medea and Hester both share the experience of being outcasts, betrayed by their male partners, and bereft of family support. Despite the undeniable similarities in their stories, it is puzzling that few people in the audience at the premiere of *By the Bog of Cats* recognized the connection. While it is now clear why the themes of Medea are integral to a serious analysis of Carr's play, it also appears that this understanding was not essential for the play to be effective.

To grasp this phenomenon, further investigation is required. *By the Bog of Cats* must encompass a complex network of meanings and associations that effectively obscured its strong link to the tragic tale of Medea. In essence, there must be a compelling element within Carr's play that eclipsed its status as an adaptation of a Greek tragedy. As we will see next, this is none other than the quintessentially Irish bogland setting of the play.

A No-man's Land *Par Excellence*: Female Agency and the Inconspicuous Lure of the Bog Landscape

As previously mentioned, *By the Bog of Cats* is typically discussed as part of Carr's 'Midlands trilogy', along with *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*. These plays feature strong-willed female protagonists who all share an unquenchable yearning for 'a lost other', leading to a common tragic destiny. To be specific, Hester, The Mai,[16] and Portia[17] are haunted by the absence of a mother, a husband, and a brother, respectively.

For Hester, the trauma of being abandoned at a young age by her mother drastically influences her decision-making and solidifies her headstrong disposition, ultimately leading to her self-inflicted death. The Mai, for her part, is a woman abandoned by her husband, Robert, who left her and their four children because of his futile desire for fame and recognition. To regain his love, she has built a gorgeous house overlooking Owl Lake, where she spends her time waiting for Robert to return. When he eventually reappears, The Mai bitterly realizes that emotionally he is still absent and that he cheats on her. Realizing that all her efforts to reconcile and live happily together have been in vain, The Mai calmly goes to meet her end in Owl Lake. Finally, for Portia, it is the absence of her twin brother Gabriel that torments her. Although she is married to Raphael, and together they have three sons and they seem to lead an enviable life, her mind is set on the memory of her dead brother. Fifteen years ago, Gabriel and Portia had agreed to a suicide pact that did not go as planned, resulting in Gabriel drowning alone in Belmont River. No matter what efforts made, Portia's grief for her twin brother is insurmountable, leading her to commit suicide by jumping into the river, in an attempt to reunite and become one again with Gabriel.

Overall, it would be overly simplistic to interpret the suicides of these three women as mere acts of surrender. None of these heroines yields to adversity, nor passively accepts the *status quo*. Instead, they tenaciously fight with all available means until their last breath. When suicide happens to be the only viable choice, they choose it with a sense of autonomy and determination. Indeed, this self-empowering stance that Carr bestows upon her female protagonists diverges from the conventional portrayals of women on Irish stage:

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[16] The classical references associated with *The Mai* extend beyond Sophocles' *Electra*: "The Mai's name evokes the Greek Goddess Maia, one of the seven daughters of Atlas. References to her can be found in *The Homeric Hymns*, specifically in the 'Homeric Hymn to Hermes', where she is identified with a nymph and thus attached to water, and also related to darkness and isolation through her depiction as living in a cave apart from the rest of gods and goddesses" (González Chacón 2015: 61). As for the peculiar presence of the definite article 'the', Rhona Trench clarifies that "the name 'The Mai' indicates strength and authority; her name readapts the Irish tradition of adding 'the' before the last name of the (male) head of a clan" (2010: 115).

[17] Carr has borrowed Portia's name from the protagonist of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

> In Irish dramatic tradition… the woman has always been idealized by male playwrights either as a religious figure like Virgin Mary or as sacrificing, pure and faithful beloved/wife and mother… Carr weakens the traditional female roles as the mother and wife as well as the definition of femininity on the Irish stage, through her attempts to enable her female character to reach a subject position… built on the female desire. (Chelab 2014: 8)

Maternal figures in Carr's 'Midland's trilogy' deviate significantly from the conventional image of mothers as nurturers and comforters. None of the three plays include examples of traditional, ultra-compassionate mothers, who unquestionably sacrifice themselves for the well-being of their children. Even when they are overflowing with maternal love, like Hester for Josie, they do not adhere to the typical path to demonstrate this affection. Instead, they rely on their own moral compass. As for the general rule, Grandma Fraochlán, the grandmother of The Mai, sets the tone: upon confessing her lifelong love for the nine-fingered fisherman to her daughters, she advises them that

> There's two types of people in this world from what I can gather, them as puts their children first and them as puts their lover first and for what it's worth, the nine-fingered fisherman and meself belongs ta the latter of these. I would gladly have hurled all seven of ye down the slopes of hell for one night more with the nine-fingered fisherman and may I rot eternally for such unmotherly feelin. (Carr 1999: 182)

Grandma Fraochlán's words may sound dreadful yet are indicative of the boundless prioritization of personal agency that Carr bequeaths to her female characters. The focalization of female desire encompasses various subject positions, including the desire to be a 'lover' before 'mother' as well as the empowerment through suicide that Hester opts for.

Additionally, Carr exposes the pain that one woman can inflict to another. In Hester's case, it is the absence of her mother that haunts her throughout the play. When Hester was seven years old, the same age as her daughter now, she was left by her mother, Big Josie. Big Josie was a larger-than-life character who would "go off for days with anywan who'd buy her a drink. She'd be off in the bars of Pullagh and Mucklagh getting' into fights [and] wance she bit the nose off a woman who dared to look at her man" (*BC*: 32). Since then, Hester hopelessly anticipates her mother's return to the Bog of Cats, hoping to reunite with her. "Ah, how can I lave the Bog of Cats, everythin' I'm connected to is here. I'd rather die" (*Ibid*. 11), Hester confesses to Catwoman when the latter warns her about an ominous dream she had and urges Hester to leave the bog immediately. Although not explicitly stated until later in the play, the root cause of Hester's resistance when pressured to leave the place is her trauma of maternal abandonment. Hester has been unable

overcome the maternal neglect she experienced as a child, and her persistent hope for Big Josie's return is a defence mechanism.

Therefore, Carr explores the mother-daughter bond on two levels: through Hester's relationship with her daughter and her non-relationship with her mother. In this framework, Hester is depicted both as a mother of a five-year-old daughter and as a middle-aged daughter of an absent mother:

> Carr's play challenges the social construction of identity with a powerful account of a mother-daughter bond. Carr shifts the focus of the original myth from stereotypical feminine sexual jealousy and female wickedness… to the deeper layers of the feminine unconscious as well as construction of feminine subjectivity and identity, symbiotically connected with a lost m/other. In other words, Carr rewrites the myth of Medea from a woman's perspective this time. (Sayin 2008: 77-78)

Carr extends the notions of female agency and motherhood to a new dimension, suggesting an inherent connection between Hester's filicide and her unrelenting fear of the lost 'Mother-Land' that she experiences throughout the play. Carr intertwines these two ideas, presenting a theorisation of motherhood that links Hester's experience of abandonment by her own mother to her unwavering resolve to remain in Bog of Cats – her motherland – at any cost. "I can't lave – Ya see me mother said she'd come back here" (*BC*: 52), are Hester's words underscoring the interchangeability that occurs in her mind between mother figure and motherland. Hester's feelings for her mother, her daughter, and her homeland are intertwined. When she painfully acknowledges that all three have been threatened, Hester arms herself and defends them fiercely, using whatever resources she has left.

All in all, for nonconforming characters like Hester, Portia, or The Mai, to effectively adopt a radical self-determining stance, Carr must contrast these deviant heroines against a newly conceived *mise-en-scène* that accommodates their perceived uniqueness. Focusing on *By the Bog of Cats*, a detailed examination of the role of the bog landscape has the potential to provide insights into the dynamics of this interplay between subversive female protagonist and landform theorisation. As Shonagh Hill notes:

> The bog accommodates shifting identities, the supernatural and the mythic realm. In all three of the Midlands plays, the central character has a private mythology which connects the landscape with the lost other. This creates a tension in the female mythmaking of Carr's plays: it can reinforce a restrictive model of family and female genealogy but it also offers the women an alternative space and attempts to house a female symbolic. Hester's private mythology intertwines fate and genealogy in a potentially stifling manner but the mythmaking in the play also opens up 'pluralising

> futures' through Hester's rewriting of both limiting models of femininity and her tragic ending, and through cultivating the possibilities of the bog. (2019: 19)

To gain a deeper understanding of how this interdependence works, one must focus on the setting of Carr's play. As mentioned previously, the Bog of Cats is situated in the heart of Ireland. As evident from the quotes from the play, Carr takes special care to capture the idiosyncrasies of the Irish dialect in order to reproduce the distinct rural Midlands atmosphere.[18] Specifically, Carr employs the local idiom to convey the feeling that it is not the Dublin Metropolis but Ireland's geographic peripheries and its people therein that her plays are predominantly concerned about:

> The midlands plays *are* steeped in Irish culture, and the flat, guttural accent of the characters serve as a geographical marker of this identity... Carr's characters inhabit primarily rural communities, and are characterized by their isolation and inwardness: they depict an Ireland that the Celtic Tiger would seem to have left far behind. (Murphy 2006: 390)

The term 'Celtic Tiger' refers to the economic expansion driven by foreign investment capital that occurred in the Republic of Ireland starting in the mid-1990s. Carr's 'Midlands trilogy', though composed during the same period, brings forward a sort of primordial ethos animatedly resisting Ireland's new-fangled liberal agenda and economic boom.[19] "Carr's characters vacillate between the old pagan world, honouring mystical deities and the supernatural, and the new free-market world of consumerism and upward social movement" (Gladwin 2011: 391).[20] Within this ambivalence, the dramatic landscape of Carr's Midlands plays almost takes the form of an experiential never-never land hanging in-between what is real and imagined:

> As contemporary Ireland rapidly evolves into an ethnically diverse, technologically advanced, economically viable member of the European Union… Irish playwrights tenaciously draw on a

[18] For an extensive exploration of the unique Hiberno-English idiom that permeates Carr's plays, carrying on a tradition established by O'Casey, Synge, and Yeats, see: Lynch (2006).

[19] As Declan Kiberd states: "In strictly linguistic terms, the Celtic Tiger was born in 1994, when David McWilliams, a young Irish dealer at the Banque Nationale de Paris, used the phrase in a report on the Irish economy. He correctly predicted that the availability of cash at low rates of interest in the following years of the decade would unleash the creativity and initiative of a people who had made shrewd use of European Union subsidies and had in their labour relations achieved a remarkable degree of social consensus" (2005: 271). For the repercussions of the Celtic Tiger phenomenon see: Maher & O'Brien (2014).

[20] Emily Kader argues that Hester symbolizes the agonies generated by Ireland's rapid modernization: "[Hester's] connections to the mythological, supernatural, and pagan elements of the play reveal yet another way that Hester is subversively traditional. As she resists the normalcy of modern Irish Catholicism, she represents the pre-modern Irish Christianity that was steeped in the pagan elements of Irish myth" (2005: 176).

> sense of the past to articulate the present. Pre-Christian systems of belief, the landscapes of ghosts and the dead, of myth and historical reference are repeatedly evoked. (Sihra 2003: 93-4)

From a historical standpoint, Carr's plays can be viewed as a response to the anxiety brought about by the complex economic and sociocultural transformations that Ireland has experienced since the latter part of the twentieth century.[21] To this effect, the topography of Carr's plays takes up a metaphorical dimension: "as a no-man's land, a claustrophobic zone of entrapment, a state of mind, and ultimately as a dystopia" (Wallace 2011: 438). In essence, Carr's plays serve as a poignant reflection of the evolving Irish identity in response to these profound shifts, turning the Midlands landscape into a metaphorical canvas that encapsulates a spectrum of emotions and societal transformations.

As hinted earlier, it seems that a notable factor is obscuring the inherent connection between *By the Bog of* Cats and *Medea*. This element is the scenery in which Carr's play unfolds, namely the land and landscape of the Irish Midlands. In *By the Bog of Cats*, the bogscape is not a mere background reference. On the contrary, it has a breathing presence; it is a living organism, almost like an autonomous character in the play.[22] It expresses "a fecund doubleness that is at once mundane and metaphysical" (Sihra 2018: 13). Accordingly, Carr's characters do not exist in a vacuum, independently of their surroundings. The bog engulfs and absorbs them. It possesses an unrestrained force that is incessantly experienced but cannot be tamed. Like a no-man's land *par excellence*, the ground of the bog remains an unconquerable place, "a rich symbolic terrain… [and] a potent receptacle of cultural memory" (*Ibid*. 123). It is a *locus* where people live, but they cannot own.

In fact, Carr is not the first to contemplate on the nature of the bog. Rather, there is a pre-existing archetypical understanding of it that she makes use of:

> Embodying the sublime qualities of terror and awe, the bog of the Midlands occupies a significant place in the Irish cultural psyche and is known for its qualities of preservation, incorporating a haunting well of associations with mythic, 'bottomless' depth and subterranean rivers. Bleak and unquantifiable, the black landscape of the Midlands has long been considered a marginal, ungovernable space of subversive possibility and dissent and has been linked to insurrection, concealment and colonial resistance. (Sihra 2005: 121)

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[21] Merely by examining the title of Ivana Bacik's book, *Kicking and Screaming: Dragging Ireland into the 21st Century* (2005), it becomes evident that Ireland's journey toward modernization was far from effortless. The same phrase is echoed in Carr's play *Ariel*, where the ruthless Agamemnon-like politician Fermoy Fitzgerald justifies his possession of political power by saying: "I brough ud kickin and screamin inta the twinty-first century" (2009: 103).

[22] In an interview Carr admits that "I've always thought that landscape was another character in the work, and if you get that right it will resonate and enrich the overall piece" (Ni Anluain 2000: 47).

A mystical environment as described above is the backdrop of *By the Bog of Cats*. In the stage directions, Carr imagines her setting as "*a bleak white landscape of ice and snow*". This is the typical landscape that one encounters when traveling around the bogland area of the Irish Midlands during the months of winter. Thus, compared to the Euripidean precursor, it is evident that the setting where the action unfolds has been significantly altered: a desolate icy bog in place of a lavish palace in Corinth. Naturally, this change raises certain questions: what are the implications of this shift in background "from the Euripidean source in a more Irish, feminine, and psychological territory" (Trotter 2008: 188)? How profound is the impact of this landscape change?

Evidently, the landscape of the Irish Midlands functions as a catalyst in *By the Bog of Cats*. It actively contributes to the development of Hester Swane, Carr' Medea-like character, endowing her with a unique demeanour. Consequently, the play's landscape must be conjectured as a verb, not a noun: "not an object to be seen or a text to be read, but a process by which social and subjective identities are formed" (Mitchell 1994: 1). With this notion in mind, the instances in Carr's play where the connection between identity formation and landscape signification surfaces, will be a focal point of this study.

The Bog of Cats Precedents: The Astounding Literariness of the Irish Bog

While there may not be a direct equivalent of the Bog of Cats on the Irish map, its landscape and structural features resemble those of an actual Midlands bog. In the seventeenth century, groups of unregenerate Irish rebels sought refuge within these bogs to evade the Crown's authorities. Later, these bogs were systematically exploited for their natural resources in fuel. Today, these so-called 'wastelands' have been reimagined as places of extraordinary beauty deserving protection from commercial exploitation. Indeed, the Bog of Cats might very well be reminiscent of the numerous bogs in county Offaly, the region where Marina Carr spent her childhood. To provide now a consise overview of the etymology and morphology of a typical bog:

> The word 'bog' comes from the Irish *bogach*, meaning soft or marshy ground. The surface of a bog consists of a thin upper layer of living vegetation, mostly sphagnum mosses, along with other plants such as heather and bog cotton. Underlying it is a much thicker layer of peat made up of compacted plant (and sometimes animal) remains accumulated over hundreds or thousands of years… Despite its surface appearance, a bog can consist of between 85 and 98 % water. (Mclean 2007: 61)

The first noteworthy aspect of a bog is its semi-solid composition. Fluctuating between solid and liquid states, a bog challenges rigid classifications of landform. A bog's landscape conveys a certain uncertainty, as if there is something indefinite lurking between the upper and lower of its layers. To quote Murphy: "The landscape of the midlands plays reflects Carr's dramatic worlds, which is quite literally 'mid' or in between, wedged in the interstices of realism and fantasy, ancient and modern, local and global" (2006: 393). Hence, a correspondence can be discerned between Carr's dramaturgy and the physical traits of the Irish bogland.

A bog's location is both a familiar and unfamiliar place, home and not home, empirical and mysterious, present and absent. Another aspect that sets a Midlands bog apart lies in its relationship with time, particularly in its ability to host the simultaneous existence of both the past and present.[23] Remarkably, it takes thousands of years for a bog to form. Given its mussy and semi-solid constancy, its apparent stagnant appearance contrasts with the coexistence of interleaving layers of ancient earth in dynamic interaction with one another. "The bog serves as a memorial to that which in reality is lost but is kept simultaneously alive in memory: a boundless

[23] Mary Trotter connects Carr's utilization of the Midlands landscape to Lady Gregory's oeuvre: "Like Lady Gregory's writing that acknowledges the relationship between Irish and Anglo-Irish, ancient and modern, Celtic and Catholic, in the communities of which she wrote, Carr's plays imagine the Irish countryside as a hybrid landscape, where tradition and innovation, belief and reason, the abject and the oppressive, cohabitate" (2008: 189).

repository of historical, cultural, and personal trauma" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2022: 12).[24] In other words, a bog is a transhistorical space that keeps the past and present in continuous communication with one another. Part of a bog's magnetism is its appeal to the unknown. As Melissa Sihra rightly argues:

> [A bog is together] a place and a non-place hovering somewhere between the actual and the imaginary… Carr's *mise en scene* has the best of both worlds. While on the one hands it is recognizably Irish, it belongs as much in the domain of Greek tragedy, Gothic horror, Absurdism and Grotesque surrealism. The play possesses the mythic dimensions of timelessness. (2008: 263-4)

Defying precise categorization is the surest claim one can make about the landscape of the bog: "This auld bog, always shiftin' and changin' and coddin' the eye" (*BC*: 5), are the words of Hester's neighbour, Monica, describing her everyday interaction with the bogland. The Bog of Cats stands as a site of mobility and paranormal activity transcending empirical judgment. Hence, transformation, indeterminacy, and trickery are a bog's three main attributes. Also minding that the Irish politician and critic Daniel Corkery, in his renowned study of Synge and Anglo-Irish literature, has introduced a soft bogland to describe Irishness at large: "Everywhere in the mentality of Irish people are flux and uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing" (1965: 14). The connections between Irish land and Irish psyche are too many to ignore.

The incontestable malleability of the 'quaking sod' also calls to mind Yeats's *dictum* during the Irish Revival about "the sudden certainty that Ireland was to be like soft wax for years to come" (qtd. in McDonald 2014: 53). Reminiscing the analogy of the wax tablet that Socrates introduces in *Theaetetus* (191a–196c) to explain how memories are engraved in the human mind, Yeats hopes that the same will apply with the inscription of a rigid national consciousness on the Irish soul, post-Celtic Revival. Therefore, whether a 'quaking sod' or a 'soft wax', both metaphors are suggestive of an ongoing association of Irishness with attributes of endless possibility and

[24] 'Trauma' is a term with multiple definitions. Depending on the context, different perceptions of 'trauma' transpire. There is even a branch of studies called 'Trauma Studies' that combines psychoanalytic, sociological, linguistic, semiotic, and neurobiological methodologies to investigate the discourse of trauma in literary studies, and its cultural significance. About the Irish bogland, the way I embrace 'trauma' is quite rudimentary, closer to a metaphor of the physical attributes of the bog. In the same way that an extreme traumatic experience creates a rupture with signification testing the limits of language, and thus can only find means of exposition in memory in non-direct linguistic representation and fragmented form, accordingly the morphology of the bog simulates such condition by exhibiting a medley of degenerate elements and heterogeneous spatiotemporal incidences that are transfused with meaning only when attested retrospectively and collectively. The amorphous bog, like trauma, bypasses linear narrative representation, and likewise calls for a reflective reordering of its constituents to start 'making sense'. For a succinct report of the genealogies of 'Trauma Studies' see: Balaev (2018).

indeterminacy.[25] Accordingly, the Bog of Cats that Carr imagines, abides to the same rules of precarious subjectivity and non-specificity.

Literary attention to the bogs of Ireland, however, did not commence with Carr. The use of the bog as a trope and literary theme predates her work, with Seamus Heaney's so-called 'Bog poems' serving as prominent contemporary examples. In his essay 'Feeling into Words', Heaney confesses his early bewitchment with the Irish bogscape, and how this impulse gave rise to the creation of a set of poems conflating the bog's unique morphology with notions of memory, preservation, and eventually national consciousness:

> I had been vaguely wishing to write a poem about bogland, chiefly because it is a landscape that has a strange assuaging effect on me, one with associations reaching back into early childhood. We used to hear about bog-butter, butter kept fresh for a great number of years under the peat. Then when I was at school the skeleton of an elk had been taken out of a bog nearby and a few of our neighbours had got their photographs in the paper, peering out across its antlers. So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. In fact, if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realize that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was 'found in a bog'. Moreover, since memory was the faculty that supplied me with the first quickening of my own poetry, I had a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. And it all released itself after 'We have no prairies . . .'—but we have bogs. (1980: 54-5)

Spanning over his first four poetry collections, the image/notion of the bog can be found in the opening poem of *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), 'Digging', in the last poem from *Door in the Dark* (1969), 'Bogland', in 'The Tollund Man' from *Wintering Out* (1972), and especially in the five consecutive poems from *North* (1975), 'Bog Queen', 'The Grabualle Man', 'Punishment', 'Strangefruit', and 'Kinship'. All these poems pinpoint the bog as an infinite archive of natural happenings, much in the way Carr in her plays confronts this conspicuously Irish land feature. In 'Digging', his manifesto poem, Heaney "heralds his poetics as an act of digging symbolic of poetic search for adequate expressions" (Islam 2019: 18). Just like his father and grandfather used to cut turf and dig for potatoes in Toner's bog, Heaney proclaims that in his poetic career he will follow in their footsteps by using his pen instead of a spade. This denotes Heaney's postulation that he will remain close to the land of the bog and his ancestral roots, but from the mental standpoint of the writer instead of the hands-on activity of the farmer.

[25] The only unequivocal statement about a bog appears to be its untameable nature. The Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, in a tirade against Irish bogs, expresses his frustration: "Abominable bog, thou salt cease to be abominable and become subject to man!" (qtd. in Bareham 1991: 92).

Discussing his creative process, Heaney remarks that he has "always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery" (1980: 34). Although the above statement is metaphoric for his whole poetics, in the specific poems under scrutiny, Heaney literally digs the bog in hunt of archaeological finds: the majority of Heaney's 'Bog poems' make mention of actual discoveries that have been unearthed from the depths of bogs across Europe. In 'Bogland', Heaney refers to the skeleton of a now extinct animal, the Great Elk, whereas in 'The Tollund Man' and 'The Grabualle Man', he observes the perfectly intact remains of two Iron Age bodies discovered in the Jutland bogs of Denmark. Both bodies are believed to be part of annual sacrificial offers to the native goddess of the land, Nerthus, to ensure the fertility of next season's crop. In 'Bog Queen', Heaney gives voice to a woman, whose body was extracted in 1781 from a bog near Moira, a small village south of Belfast. Unlike the rest of 'Bog Poems', here it is the actual body that speaks. The subject of 'Punishment' is again a bog body, named 'Windeby Girl' due to its discovery in the German municipality of Windeby.[26] Her head was found half-shaved, and a blindfold covered her eyes, though there were no visible signs of injury. The victim was probably drowned as punishment for adultery. In 'Strangefruit', the speaker's gaze is cast on a beheaded girl retrieved in bad conditions from Himmerland, a peninsula in northeastern Jutland. The decapitated head was discovered in 1942, a picture of which Heaney again encountered in the pages of Glob's book. Finally, in 'Kinship', for the sake of concluding the sequence of bog poems, Heaney brings forth a distilled grasp of his ancestral land:

> Quagmire, swampland, morass:
> the slime kingdoms,
> domains of the cold-blooded,
> of mud pads and dirtied eggs.
>
> But bog
> meaning soft
> the fall of windless rain.
> pupil of amber.

[26] The story of the 'Windeby Girl' as well as that of 'Tollund Man' and 'Grauballe Man' became known to Heaney after he read P. V. Glob's *The Bog People* (1965). The Danish archaeologist's research on the preserved bodies of men and women found in the bog area of Jutland and overseas, and whose death was commonly associated with pagan rituals of blood sacrifice, intrigued Heaney, who accordingly realized the poetic potential of the protagonists of Glob's book, especially as a metaphor for the then undergoing political instability and sectarian division in Northern Ireland. For an elaborate discussion on how Heaney's 'Bog poems' addressed the violent politics of Northern Ireland during The Troubles see: Hufstader (1996) and Foley (2009).

The above two stanzas wonderfully encapsulate Heaney's aestheticization of the Irish bog. In this context, T.P. Flanagan, the landscape artist to whom Heaney dedicates 'Bogland', brings up the poet's and painter's shared conviction "to the fundamentals of Irish landscape… [the] love of the moistness, the softness of the bog, its fecundity, its femininity, its connectedness with a pre-Christian, primeval past" (qtd. in Parker 1993: 87).

Heaney pioneers in conceptualizing the bog as a living entity and a transhistorical space, in which there is more than meets the eye: such swampy areas are responsible for conserving an infinite pool of odd fragments of the Irish past. Declan Kiberd quite aptly suggests that "the bog in Heaney's *mythos* preserves not just bodies but consciousness. Every layer, 'camped on before', tells its own history in the form of geography" (1995: 593). Upon contemplating the bog, one cannot evade the fusion between old and present time, the oblique memory of its landscape, resulting in the elevation of the bog "as 'an answering Irish myth'; as a defining symbol of what [Heaney] terms the 'national consciousness' of the Irish Catholics; and as a repository of 'Irish cultural history'" (Foley 2009: 62-3). Just as most bogs are located in the middle of Ireland, so bogs are central to the articulation of an Irish identity.

Yet, Heaney's 'Bog poems' must also be read against the contextual framework of The Troubles. As Heaney admits, from the summer of 1969 that the battle of the Bogside took place in Derry and more riots followed in Belfast, "from that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament" (Heaney 1980: 56). Heaney perceived the landscape and characteristics of the bog as a fitting symbol for addressing the escalating turmoil and challenges in Northern Ireland. The familiar Irish image of the bog, along with the fragmented remnants of past lives and violent histories skulking within its layers, provided Heaney with a powerful metaphor during a period of national identity crisis:

> By risking descent into this pagan bog and submitting to a primitive process, one which is both sacred and violent, the poet does not seek any kind of redemption, in either a pagan sense (free from compulsion) or a Christian one (free from guilt). Instead, he attempts to see for himself, to encounter the original ritual of violence, to experience it without succumbing to it, and thus to emerge with a new understanding of himself both as a part and as no longer a part of this process. (Hufstader 1996: 67)

Taking cues from the above findings and applying them to Carr's universe, it is not far-fetched to suggest that Hester and the Bog of Cats both provoke a parallel social reaction:

> They both create a binary of fear and need within the community. Hester's uncompromising roots in the landscape compel her to insist that she couldn't leave even to save herself and Josie… As such

> an extension of the landscape, Hester asserts her position. Instead of a preserved body dug from the bog, she represents a living body connected to the land on which she was born and on which she will die. (Gladwin 2011: 391)

Hester is an immovable feature within the breathing organism that is the bog. Following Joseph Hillis Miller's theorisation of landscape according to which there is always "a figure in every landscape having an impact on it, walking it, claiming it, resisting it" (1995: 4), Hester is this persona. Her strong connection with nature is linked to the age-old concept of earth as both tomb and womb: "Carr is re-working folk traditions by suggesting that her characters die, but are re-assimilated into nature, the Belmont River for the eponymous Portia Coughlan, and the bog for Hester Swane" (Bourke 2003: 133). Additionally, following the paradigm of Heaney's 'Bog poems', the dead body of Ariel, the Iphigenia-like character in Carr's eponymous play, is hidden, and thereafter retrieved, in a bog lake. Therefore, like the blood sacrifices to Nerthus that Heaney alludes to in *North*, in *Ariel*, Fermoy Fitzegerald, whose name reminisces the 80s Irish politician Garret FitzGerald, sacrifices his daughter to his 'personal God' in exchange for a prosperous career in politics. The lake of the bog is yet again the place where the body as sacrificial offering is being kept, waiting to be unearthed.

Refocusing back to *By the Bog of Cats*, Carr's personal experience with the bog scenery bears some resemblance to Hester's disposition throughout the play. When asked about the reasons for her fascination with the Midlands bogs, Carr mentions "the open spaces, the quicksand, the biting wind rosemary" (qtd. in Harris 2003: 217). Words and phrases like 'quicksand' and 'biting wind' equally underscore the constant flow of the bog landscape. In complete agreement with her character Monica, Carr admits that nothing within the territory of an Irish bog remains unaltered or unaffected over the course of time. For Carr, being at the Midlands is almost like a mental state:

> [I am often drawn in] nightly forays back to that landscape… I find myself constantly there at night: lights off, head on the pillow and once again I'm in the Midlands. I'm wrestling, talking, laughing, reeling at the nocturnal traffic that place throws up. Now I think it's no accident it's called the Midlands. For me at least it has become a metaphor for the crossroads between the worlds. (*Ibid*.)

Evidently, Carr gives the same credence to the otherworld and the everyday. By the same token, her Midlands stand literally in-between "the gritty Dublin urbanscape and the green West of peasant Ireland" (Lojek 2011: 68). It is a purgatory place, geographically central but culturally remote, with an ambiguous interior landscape incorporating signifiers of this world, and unfathomable aspects from the world under. Characteristically, Carr has confessed that in her

childhood “the banshee was as real as the farmer walking up the field or the chair you’re sitting on. There were no distinctions” (qtd. in Sihra 2018: 120).

All Carr’s statements combined underscore the formation of a rural space that sharply contrasts with traditional bucolic depictions of the Irish countryside, as an idyllic place. To draw a meaningful analogy, the gloomy landscape of the bog stands in stark opposition to the vision of an ideal Ireland that the former Taoiseach Éamon de Valera articulated in his radio broadcast on St. Patrick’s Day in 1943, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Gaelic League. Often titled as the ‘The Ireland That We Dreamed of’ speech, Valera makes reference to

> a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.

The Ireland that Carr is dreaming of is certainly not made from the same material. The Bog of Cats diverges significantly from de Valera’s romantic bucolia.[27] It is a grotesque world haunted by ghosts and rules of its own. It is an intimidating and hazardous place, not welcoming and joyful:

> Carr's characteristic representation of the Midlands of Ireland renegotiates the 'stability' of dominant of a romantic, green Irish landscape. This mid-lands, or between-lands, displays an ambivalent poetics of Irish topography in its negative relation to the popular, romantically constructed landscapes of East and West. (Sihra 2003: 95)

Carr capitalizes on the liminal yet omnipresent identity of the bog. The bog is a sort of metaspace, which “questions boundaries, both geographical and epistemological” (Graham 2001: 24). Serving as a tangible metaphor of the subconscious and the uncanny, this in-between, supernatural, eerie space provides the perfect backdrop for her reimagining of the Medea story.

Overall, in *By the Bog of Cats*, the unbreakable connection between ‘landscape, identity, and memory’ becomes glaringly apparent. What will follow in the next section is a deeper investigation of the characterization of Hester Swane, looking at how Carr links her Medea-like protagonist to both Greek and Irish mythology.

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[27] As Michael Böss mentions: “From his accession to power in 1932… Eamon de Valera had been engaged in a political process of severing the last constitutional links between Britain and the Irish Free State. The process culminated in ‘his’ Constitution of 1937. The Constitution laid down the structure for a future Irish Republic once the remaining obstacle, partition, had been removed. The state thus created was new in so far as the Constitution reflected a distinct conception of Ireland as a Gaelic and Catholic nation-state” (2010: 21).

Swane Means Swan: The Amalgamation of Irish and Greek Myth

Hester's relationship with the land of the bog is mystical and representative of the continuing rural superstitions about nature in Irish culture. Hester's life cannot remain untouched by this association. Completely entwined within the Midlands bogscape, Hester naturally forms connections with the animal creatures that share her living space. So, it is not exclusively the land of the bog with which Hester is entangled in a deeper sense, but also with the living beings inhabiting its surface, particularly the swan. Understanding the symbolism of the swan in the play, especially its semantic significance showcasing a range of Hiberno-Greek nuances, becomes pivotal for Hester's identity development. The swan, an integral feature of the bogscape throughout the play, embraces Hester both semantically and symbiotically. Consequently, by focusing on the image of the swan, the play's most prominent Greek and Irish elements are symbolically represented.

In the opening of the play, Hester is seen dragging "*the corpse of a black swan after her, leaving a trail of blood in the snow*" (*BC*: 1). The swan's name is Black Wing. When Ghost Fancier, the Grim Reaper figure of the play that acts as Hester's subconscious, and who is invisible to the rest of the characters, warns Hester that it is risky to meddle with swans, particularly if they are black, she responds that this is "only an auld superstition to keep people afraid" (*Ibid*: 4). Believing or not in superstitions, Hester comes from an environment where they comprise a big part of popular belief and conventional wisdom. Indeed, given Hester's surname, "Swane means swan" (*Ibid*. 13), one cannot help but acknowledge the symbolism. A few moments later in the play, we learn that when Hester's mother gave birth to her, she placed her in the lair of the Black Wing due to a prophecy that Hester "will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less" (*Ibid*.).[28] There is little doubt then that the swan serves as Hester's spirit animal. When Ghost Fancier asks her "What're you doin' draggin' the corpse of a swan behind ya like it was your shadow" (*Ibid*. 3), his words take on a more literal significance than one might initially assume.

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[28] Emily Kader underlines a resemblance between Hester's curse and a story derived from the Fenian Cycle: "[the swan] curse interestingly connects Hester to Diarmuid, another figure of Irish myth who refused to flee his fate. In Mary Heaney's translation, Finn tells Diarmuid to run from the boar that is killing scores of men in their hunting troop. The text reads:

> Diarmuid didn't move. 'I'll face the boar! He won't drive *me* away!' he cried. 'You can't do that, Diarmuid', warned Finn. 'Remember there is a *geis* on you never hunt a pig.

Like Hester, Diarmuid refuses to flee and avoid his clearly predicted fate. In Carr's drama, the Catwoman even plays the part of Finn when she tells Hester, 'There's way round curses. Curses only have the power ya allow them. I'm tellin' ya, Hester, ya have to go'. Like Diarmuid, Hester is equally fixed in her position" (2005: 178-9).

Indeed, the prophecy comes to pass, and Hester dies on the very day her alter ego is found frozen in a bog hole.[29]

The swan is an animal with unique symbolism in Celtic mythology, and a special place in Irish history. For instance, 'The Dream of Aengus' is a mythical tale that narrates how the Irish love-god Aengus saw in his dreams the princess Caer Ibormeith, and eventually fell in love with her. However, every time that Angus was trying to reach her in his dreams, the girl would disappear. After having his dream interpreted and embarking on a long quest, Angus discovers that Caer is fated to spend the majority of her life as a swan, turning to human form every alternate Samhain, and then reverting into being a swan. For Aengus to marry her, he must first recognize Caer in her swan form among a group of hundred and fifty identical birds, and subsequently, he must agree to undergo transformation into a swan as well. Aengus eventually succeeds in his mission, and joins Caer in the long-awaited embrace with their swan necks entwined. The tale concludes with the two birds singing a lullaby making all of Ireland to slumber for three consecutive days and nights.

Another story starring swans comes from the Children of Lir legend (*Oidheadh chloinne Lir*). After the death of his wife Aoibh, Lir remarries a woman named Aoife. However, Aoife is jealous of the four children that Lir had with his deceased wife, and she plots to get rid of them. Aoife uses magic powers to transform them into swans. The spells do work, and the four children, Fionnuala together with her three brothers, Fiachra, Conn, and Aodh, are cursed to spend the next nine hundred years in a swan form. What is more curious, however, is that this mythical tale relates to a historical episode involving swans. As Fiona Macintosh notes:

> In 1924, after the foundation of the Free State, Oliver St John Gogarty – the surgeon who had also received a classical training at Trinity under Mahaffy – launched two swans into 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. (1994: 15)

A year before writing the poem, Gogarty was held captive by IRA militants. Gogarty managed to escape from his captors by leaping into the Liffey and swimming towards his freedom. As an act of gratitude, Gogarty released the two swans into the river, while composing a fitting poem for the occasion. The poem's title is 'To the Liffey with the Swans' from the collection *An Offering of Swans and Other Poems* (1924), and makes mention of "a King's | Transformed, beloved and buoyant daughter", which is Fionnuala turned into a swan from the Lir legend.

Interestingly, in the same poem, there is also a Greek mythic element involving swans. Gogarty makes mention of

[29] Curiously, in 'The Grabualle Man', Heaney compares the bog body found in there to a "swan's foot".

that doubled Bird,
By love of Leda so besotten
That she was all with wonder stirred,
And the Twin Sportsmen were begotten!

This "doubled Bird" is Zeus, who, according to the Greek myth, overcome by passion for Leda, takes the form of a swan and rapes her. The same day Leda also lays in bed with her husband Tyndareus, King of Sparta. Leda produces two eggs from the double consummation, from which hatched Helen, Clytemnestra, and the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, to whom Gogarty refers as "Twin Sportsmen". Castor and Pollux, despite being twins, had different paternal origins: Castor was born mortal, the son of Tyndareus, while Pollux was divine, being the son of Zeus.

Overall, Gogarty's intermingling of Greek and Celtic mythology using the symbol of the swan as a focal point is not that separate from Carr's application of the Medea story to the mythologies of the Irish land. In both cases, we observe an osmosis of two mythological traditions: Gogarty makes mention of two swans, the first Irish – the second Greek, whereas Carr's Hester Swane is an Irish woman inspired by a Greek heroine living in an 'Irishly' mythologized environment as is the bog.

Persisting on the Hiberno-Greek overtones of the swan imagery, W. B. Yeats refers to the same mythical episode in his 'Leda and the Swan' poem. In the first stanza, Yeats vividly describes the erotic attack of a disguised Zeus to his female target:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. (1996*:* 216)

Yeats does not stop at the description of the violent erotic scene, but also foreshadows the result of this consummation:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead. (*Ibid*.)

Here, Yeats refers to the aftermath of the Trojan war and Clytemnestra's assassination of Agamemnon, when the later finally returns to Argos after assisting his brother Menelaus to bring Helen, Zeus' and Leda's offspring, back to Sparta. The inclusion of the bloodbath at Mycenae as

well as the allusion to the Trojan war are not accidental. According to Yeats, such deadly episodes are the consequence of the violence and terror that the union of god and human brings about.

To elaborate further, the symbol of the Swan, together with that of the Dove, are central to the Yeatsian epistemology. In his philosophical treatise *A Vision* (1925), Yeats expounds his view on History proposing a model of overlapping historical eras that displace each other every approximately two thousand years. This pattern of alternating historical cycles is illustrated by the images of 'Dove' and 'Swan'. The symbol of the Dove refers to the annunciation of Virgin Mary, and the traditional depiction of the Holy Ghost in the form of a descending dove. In 'The Mother of God', Yeats describes the episode of Mary's gestation as 'The Threefold terror of love", and "The terror of all terrors that I bore | The Heavens in my womb" (1996: 253). Of course, the result of this horrific union between mortal and divine is Jesus Christ, whose birth signals for Yeats the end of the pagan civilization, and the beginning of a new Christian era.

To use Yeats's own words, the Christian annunciation symbolized by the Dove inaugurates a "*primary* dispensation looking beyond itself towards a transcendent power, [and which] is dogmatic, levelling, unifying, feminine, humane, peace its means and end" (*AVB 263*). As for the preceding Classical annunciation symbolized by the Swan, it inaugurates "an *antithetical* dispensation, [which] obeys immanent power, is expressive, hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh, surgical" (*Ibid*.).[30] This cyclical understanding of Yeats's conceptualization of History implies that there will be another *antithetical* annunciation soon, not Christ this time, but His *antithetical* opposite, a "rough beast", as Yeats hints in 'The Second Coming'.[31]

Going back to *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester has a visceral connection with the black swan in the play. Black Wing is more than a *memento mori* for Hester; it is a token of death. When the swan dies, Swane is doomed as well. The link between swan and death has several classical underpinnings. For instance, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra describes the death of Cassandra, who, like a swan, has sung her funeral song (*ἡ δέ τοι κύκνου δίκην τὸν ὕστατον μέλψασα θανάσιμον γόον*) (*Ag.* 1444-5). Also, in Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates remarks that swans, when they feel that they are dying, sing louder and more beautiful than any previous time, rejoicing in the knowledge that they will reunite with the gods (*Phd*. *84e*-85a). Finally, in the *Hymn to Apollo*, Callimachus celebrates the singing skills of the white-feathered bird as follows: "the Delian palm gently swayed in a sudden, pleasant nod, and the sweet song of the swan filled the air" (*ἐπένευσεν ὀ Δήλιος ἠδύ τι φοῖνιξ ἑξαπίνης, ὀ δὲ κύκνος ἐν ἠέρι καλὸν ἀείδει*) (*Hymn*. 2.4-5). Correspondingly,

[30] The fact that Leda gets raped by the Swan, whereas Mary remains pure after her contact with the Dove, basically encapsulates the opposite yet complementary attributes of the two *antithetical* eras.

[31] For a comprehensive exploration of the intricate and esoteric system of ideas presented in *A Vision* see: Mann, Gibson, and Nally (2012).

at the play's finale, when Hester is about to commit suicide, she might not sing, but together with Ghost Fancier "*They go into a death dance*" (*BC*: 77); a crowning ritualistic expression of death – "at once terrifying and jubilant" (Bourke 2003: 139) – validating the swan prophecy.[32] Appropriately, the final lines are given to Monica, Hester's only ally, noting that "Hester – She's gone – Hester – She's cut her heart out – it's lying there on top of her chest like some dark feathered bird" (2004: 77). The transformation of Hester into a black swan is now complete. Hester's death signals her assimilation with Black Wing, whose lifeless body she was dragging out of the bog when the curtain first rose. Indeed, the 'swan song' (*κύκνειον ᾄσμα*) is a proverbial phrase used since antiquity to denote a person's final gesture before death. Arguably, Hester Swane's *κύκνειον ᾄσμα*, the culmination before collapse, is the killing of her daughter. A surely harmonious match in word and deed.[33]

Returning to the opening of the play, it becomes evident that the Bog of Cats operates under a unique set of rules compared to most places. It is a mythical place, where rational thinking is overcome by intuition and clairvoyance**.** Supernatural phenomena are not *a priori* rejected with disbelief but are accepted as possible scenarios. When Hester is asked by Ghost Fancier if she has ever seen a ghost, she says no but does not deny the possibility of their existence:

> Ghost Fancier: You never seen ghosts?
> Hester: Not exactly, felt what I thought were things from some other world betimes, but nothin' I could grab on to and say, 'That is a ghost.' (*BC*: 3)[34]

Besides the evident irony that she is having the above conversation with a ghost-like figure, Hester's casual depiction of the bog as a place that interacts with entities from other worlds reveals its otherworldly characteristics. The bog is porous and permeable; a space open to supernatural influences, where the dead live among the living. Above, it has already been

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[32] Ghost Fancier stabs Hester with "the fishing knife" (*BC*: 77), the same knife Hester has used moments before to cut the throat of her daughter. In a comparable episode, at the end of Yeats's *Purgatory* (1938), a peculiar play inspired by the Japanese Noh theatre, and the title of which evokes a certain cosmic in-betweenness similar to the aura of *By Bog of Cats*, the Old Man kills his son Boy with a jack-knife, believing that by murdering him, the spell of parricide cast against his family will once for all be broken.

[33] In an interview with Mike Murphy, Marina Carr admits that "The swan is huge in Irish mythology... I'm drawing on that motif in the Irish canon. I grew up by a lake from ten years of age on, so I had a good seven years looking out and watching swans. They say the swan is the soul bird" (Ni Anluain 2000: 50). In the same conversation, Carr also asserts that swans are very territorial, and that when her mother died, the swans of the lake gathered outside her family home. "She always loved swans, so I think they came to say goodbye" (*Ibid*.), she concludes.

[34] Hester's response about the existence of ghosts echoes Carr's opinion on the matter. "I think they're probably around all of us" (Ni Anluain 2000: 49). When asked if she knows who they are, Carr hesitates: "Sometimes, and sometimes I don't have a clue" (*Ibid*.).

underscored how, due to a bog's peculiar morphology, past and present happen to co-exist. Additionally, there is another aspect about the conceptualization of time in Carr's play that deserves one's attention, namely its apparent non-linearity. Ghost Fancier, incapable of comprehending the flow of time, mistakes dawn for dusk:[35]

> Ghost Fancier: Is it sunrise or sunset?
> Hester: Why do ya want to know?
> Ghost Fancier: Just tell me.
> Hester: It's that hour when it could be aither dawn or dusk, the light bein' so similar. But it's dawn, see there's the sun comin' up.
> Ghost Fancier: Then I'm too previous. I mistook this hour for dusk. A thousand apologies. (*Ibid*. 4)

The hour that Hester refers to, that can be either dawn or dusk, is the so-called golden hour, the time during which, according to Irish folklore, the worlds of the living and the dead interlock, permitting the druids to perform their rituals. Besides, this twilight hour in which the encounter between Hester and Ghost Fancier takes place, calls to mind W. B. Yeats's *Celtic Twilight* (1893), a collection of old Irish folktales covering a world haunted by faeries, ghosts, and spirits. By making this temporal allusion to the *Twilight* anthology, Carr sets one foot in this magic realm, and, arguably, embeds the events narrated in *By the Bog of Cats* within the oral tradition of Irish folklore.[36] Moreover, Ghost Fancier's anticipation of Hester's death alongside his miscalculation regarding the time this will happen, generates a carnivalesque image of the Irish Banshee: the legend of the fairy woman with the red eyes that heralds the death of a person to his loved ones by shrieking and wailing.

Thus, poised between Greek myth and Irish folklore, between places that are never purely real or wholly fictional, with the dramatic time being on a cusp as well, it is the very contested landscape of the bog that equips the play with its hybrid undertone, one that while abiding to the plotline of *Medea*, also brands it distinctly Irish. As a result, the bog, apart from the material bodies and other objects preserved in there, must be conjectured as a sort of living memory-bank that, in a Heaney-like fashion, stores in its layers the immaterial tradition of Irish folktale, be it the

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[35] Again, in an interview, Carr discloses how her views are not that disparate from the circumstances of her characters: "I have never believed that time is linear. If you don't believe that time is linear, then it is all up for grabs really, isn't it?" (Chambers, FitzGibbon, and Jordan 2001: 59).

[36] As Mclean notes: "The pale lights often seen flickering over bogs and other marshy places (and sometimes attributed to the spontaneous combustion of gases emanating from peat) have been identified in folklore with malevolent spirits, such as the 'Huldre' (Denmark) or the 'Water Sheerie' or 'Bog Sprite' (Ireland), seeking to entice unwary travelers to a watery death" (2007: 63).

Children of Lir saga or the Diarmuid Ua Duibhne segment from the Fenian Cycle, as well as the Greek mythology megatext, part of which is the deadly story of Medea.[37]

Yet, contrary to Medea, Hester's destiny is foretold. By mistaking dawn for dusk and arriving too early, Ghost Fancier foreshadows the death of Hester, and his shadowy involvement in it.[38] Hester's demise begins unravelling well before she physically dies in the play, since the viewer knows from the outset that, unlike Euripides' heroine, Hester is not going to escape death after she has killed Josie. Such device reminds one what Fiona Macintosh maintains about death rituals in ancient Greece and Ireland, namely that "death in tragedy is a culmination not an ending" (1994: 91-92), in the same way that according to Irish folk belief "the dead person is not considered to be completely 'dead' for a whole month after the moment of death, but continues to exist in a state of flux somewhere between the world of the living and the world of the dead" (*Ibid*. 21). In both respective cases, the point of death does not necessarily coincide with the climax of death.

While it is clear from the beginning that Hester is destined to die, what remains unforeseeable is the climactic progression leading to that end. On that note, she even confesses out loud that "for a long time now I been thinkin' I'm already a ghost" (*BC*: 58).[39] Hester has a gut feeling that her death is near, and such premonition is indubitably a by-product of the outlandish environment she inhabits. As Gladwin argues:

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[37] Hélène Lecossois makes an interesting observation concerning Hester's partaking of Greek and Irish myth: "Through her twofold mythological heritage, Hester is also irremediably linked to water: Idyia [Medea's mother, in some traditions] is an Oceanid, Lir the Ocean god. The bog symbolically encompasses the mixture of earth and water and may be seen as an objective parallel to (or extension of) Hester" (2012: 72).

[38] Carr's choice of personifying death is part of an ongoing tradition in Irish theatre: "modern Irish drama is often conditioned by the reality or idea of death, and many great Irish dramatists in the twentieth century explore death or funereal situations in memorable scenes in their plays. Death was a constant source of spiritual fascination in Yeats's life and plays; Christy Mahon's father is a revenant of sorts; Dan Burke shams death in *In the Shadow of the Glen*; the repetition of the 'riddled with bullets' speech in *Juno and the Paycock* redoubles its tragic effect, and the Christian notion of death's lack of 'sting' is satirised in *The Hostage*, when the dead Leslie is resurrected to perform a song and dance act. These classic instances involve strong physical as well as spiritual manifestations of death. Today's Irish dramatists carry on this tradition of dramatic death in their own distinctive and updated versions" (Dantanus 2010: 272-3).

[39] Also Portia, in the eponymous play, self-styles as ghost: "Ah'm dead Maggie May, dead an' whah ya seen this long time gone be a ghost who chan't fin' her restin' place, is all" (qtd. in McGuiness 1996: 293). As a result, both Hester and Portia consider themselves perished well before their biological end, and they accordingly introduce the image of the ghost to illustrate this kind of hanging experience. Such outlook necessitates "that the dying character meets his or her death not once but many times; often, as the intensity of their suffering escalates, they are seen to occupy a liminal zone in which it is difficult to determine whether they are living or dead" (Roche 1998: 279-80).

> The supernatural dimension is central to Carr's use of the bog as both *trope* and *setting*. As much as the bog exists as an indescribable place, floating between worlds, Hester too lives between death and life. Although the Ghost Fancier *mistakes* the time of her death, there is a clear sense that Hester is already *dead*. (2011: 391)

Hester, before Ghost Fancier exits the stage, shouts after him: "Come back! – I can't die – I have a daughter" (*BC*: 5). Hovering between two worlds, Hester's instinctive reaction is to think of her daughter's well-being, dreading at the idea of what her apparent death would entail for Josie. The same, however, cannot be maintained for Medea, as in opening of the tragedy, the Nurse introducing the story underlines that "She abhors the children and takes no joy in looking at them" (*στυγεῖ δὲ παῖδας οὐδ᾽ ὀρῶσ᾽ εὐφραίνεται*) (*Med.* 36). Medea hates her children because she sees the likeness of Jason in them. Hester does not recognize this kind of intricate connection between Carthage and Josie, whom she wants to protect up until the end.[40]

For instance, at the start of Act Three, Hester is confronted by yet another ghost, the spectre of her deceased brother, Joseph, whom she had murdered blinded by jealousy because their mother, Big Josie, was displaying greater affection toward him.[41] Once again, the corresponding Greek mythic episode is contrasting: Medea kills her brother Absyrtus, dismembers him, and throws his pieces into the sea in order that her father Aeëtes, who in the meantime chases her and Jason, will lose time collecting the limbs of his son. This way, Medea paves the way for the Argonauts to flee Colchis with the Golden Fleece.[42] In this context, the death of Absyrtus serves as a means to an end, a grim necessity in the pursuit of escape. Medea's passion for Jason, and her willingness to aid him succeed in his mission, overpowers any love sentiments she has for Absyrtus.[43] Hester's murder of Joseph, in contrast, is not purely instrumental; instead,

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[40] As Riana O'Dwyer accurately observes when comparing Hester to the other maternal role models portrayed in Carr's 'Midlands trilogy': "Hester and Josie are devoted to each other; they play games and have fun. There is no sense of neglect, as in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, but of deep love and affection" (2008: 245).

[41] Carr stresses the power and significance that names bear. Big Josie's clear preference of Joseph over Hester is illustrated in christening terms: "And she even called ya after her. And calls me Hester. What sourt of a name is Hester? Hester's after no wan. And she saves her own name for you" (*BC*: 56).

[42] A classical source of the above episode is Ovid's *Tristia* (3.9.1.). Yet, Ovid's most famous account of the Medea story can be found in *Metamorphoses* (7.1-424). Ovid is furthermore connected to Medea because he also had to face exile. He was banished by Augustus to Tomis, on the Black Sea. The origin of the name of the city of Tomis is disputed. It either comes from the Scythian queen Tomyris or is again connected to Medea and the murder of Absyrtus. In Greek *τέμνειν* means to 'cut off' or 'divide into pieces'. Such verb not only encapsulates the manner of Absyrtus' death, but also points to the impact that Tomis' landscape has for Ovid, as he has been cut off and excluded from the Roman *urbanitas* and civilization.

[43] Compared to other instances of the Medea myth, the killing of Absyrtus has been largely overlooked by classical scholarship. Jan Bremmer is a vivid exception arguing that the most troubling aspect of the bloodstained sibling relationship is the different sex between the perpetrator and the victim: "Brother and sister were imagined to be especially close, as Antigone's words attest, but their closeness arose in part

it instills a particular psychic disposition. After overcoming the initial shock of Joseph's reappearance, Hester confronts her brother by bringing up the same old traumatic events of her neglect, and contrasting her role as mother to Big Josie's: "Was it somethin' I done on her? I was seven, same as me daughter Josie, seven, and there isn't anythin' in this wide world Josie could do that'd make me walk away from her" (*BC*: 56).

Evidently, Hester does not share the same deadly instincts as Medea towards her offspring, nor is Carthage proven to be as much important to her as Jason is to Medea. Hester's predicament is all about her mother, not her lover. As for Joseph, his murder is accordingly informed by such contrast. Joseph is just one of the many obstacles along the way separating Hester from Big Josie's love and acceptance, and thus he had to be eliminated. As for Hester's complicated relationship with her mother and how this triggered her to adopt a radical perspective on motherhood, they will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

from the fact that the brother was *responsible* for the sister, and she was *dependent* upon him… By killing her brother, Medea not only committed the heinous act of spilling familial blood, she also permanently severed all ties to her natural home and the role that it would normally play in her adult life. Through Absyrtus' murder, she simultaneously declared her independence from her family and forfeited her right to any protection from it" (1997: 99-100).

All About my Mother: Unorthodox Motherhood and Hester's Killer Instinct

Arguably, the most significant departure of *By the Bog of Cats* from Euripides' *Medea* lies in Hester's suicide following her act of filicide. The natural question to consider here is why Carr chooses not to adhere to the Euripidean precedent of escape, and what implications arise from this departure from the ancient source. Hester dies, while Medea flees. Why does Carr not offer her heroine a similar escape but instead opts for her downfall? Does this particular choice make Hester a weaker, less effective counterpart to Medea, or is there an underlying strategy behind why Hester takes her last breath while kneeling on her ancestral land?

To illuminate the contrast between the two plays, one must commence by examining the core element they share, namely the portrayal of filicide. As mentioned earlier, Medea's crime is enacted in the knowledge that her sons are in the image and likeness of Jason, and hence irreplaceable to him. This almost biblical rendition of the father-son relationship, along with a grasp of the disastrous repercussions following its disruption, constitute the paramount motive for Medea's filicide. In Medea's address to her soon-to-be dead children, Medea acknowledges her anguish, while also indirectly outlining her anticipation of Jason's forthcoming reaction as the motivating factor behind her crime:

> Give, my children, your right hand to be kissed by your mother. O so dear to me hands and lips, o noble face and expression of my children, I wish happiness to you but over there. What is here has been deprived of you from your father. O sweet touch, o tender skin and fragrant breath of my children. Go away, go away: I can no longer bear looking at you, I am conquered by this evil that possesses me. And I understand very well the wickedness that I am about to commit, but my wrath proves stronger than my sober resolution, that kind of wrath that brings to mortal men the gravest pains.

δότ', ὦ τέκνα,
δότ' ἀσπάσασθαι μητρὶ δεξιὰν χέρα.
ὦ φιλτάτη χείρ, φίλτατον δέ μοι στόμα
καὶ σχῆμα καὶ πρόσωπον εὐγενὲς τέκνων,
εὐδαιμονοῖτον, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖ: τὰ δ' ἐνθάδε
πατὴρ ἀφείλετ'. ὦ γλυκεῖα προσβολή,
ὦ μαλθακὸς χρὼς πνεῦμά θ' ἥδιστον τέκνων.
χωρεῖτε χωρεῖτ': οὐκέτ' εἰμὶ προσβλέπειν
οἵα τε πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἀλλὰ νικῶμαι κακοῖς.
καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἷα τολμήσω κακά,
θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων,
ὅσπερ μεγίστων αἴτιος κακῶν βροτοῖς. (*Med*. 1069-80)

As this passage makes clear, Medea's motherly feelings are overcome by her thirst for revenge. Medea bemoans the wasted youth of her sons, their hands, lips, and faces, but their prosperity becomes secondary when contrasted to her inner urge to annihilate Jason. In total agreement with the Nurse's introductory speech, Medea declares out loud that she can no longer stare at her kids. Therefore, although it would be wrong to assume that there is no emotional cost to Medea when she prepares to kill her sons, the prospect of the children being separated from their paternal counterpart reins in any doubts she may have.

Medea's resolution becomes even more palpable in her final appeal to the Chorus of Corinthian women. She grimly declares that her decision is unwavering; she is about to kill her children and depart from this land (*φίλαι, δέδοκται τοὔργον ὡς τάχιστά μοι παῖδας κτανούσῃ τῆσδ᾽ ἀφορμᾶσθαι χθονός*) (*Med*. 1236-7). More cold-blooded, however, is the justification behind Medea's steadfastness: the children must die at all costs. And since they must die, she, who brought them to life, must be the designated executioner (*πάντως σφ᾽ ἀνάγκη κατθανεῖν: ἐπεὶ δὲ χρή, ἡμεῖς κτενοῦμεν οἵπερ ἐξεφύσαμεν*) (*Med*. 1240-1). The last two excerpts give some insight behind Medea's murderous act. However, the thought process underlying Medea's attempt to justify the crime has its gaps. Does Medea truly suggest that only a mother possesses a kind of natural right to reclaim the lives she brought into the world?

Perhaps, a more candid reformulation of Medea's reasoning might be that, as she prioritized causing Jason the utmost anguish as her ultimate objective, killing their children is the sole means to achieve it. In fact, a few lines later, Medea shares this truth to Jason:

> Jason: O children, most dear.
> Medea: To their mother, not to you.
> Jason: And so, you slayed them?
> Medea: Only to plunge you into ruin.
>
> Ἰάσων: ὦ τέκνα φίλτατα.
> Μήδεια: μητρί γε, σοὶ δ᾽ οὔ.
> Ἰάσων: κἄπειτ᾽ ἔκανες;
> Μήδεια: σέ γε πημαίνουσ᾽. (*Med*. 1397-8)

Therefore, it is not exactly because she has brought them to life that Medea is justified to kill the children, but mostly because, being herself a mother to these children, she knows the exact pain she could inflict to Jason by removing their life and then flying away, leaving Jason to cope with the catastrophe alone. In a way, Medea has stopped being a mother the moment her rage prevails over her maternal instincts, driving her to turn against her own children. In fact, Medea's following

words vividly disclose the transformation from 'mother' to 'child murderer': "Common, my heart, put on your armor. Why do I delay doing the most terrible deed that must be done?" (*ἀλλ᾽ εἶ᾽ ὀπλίζου, καρδία: τί μέλλομεν τὰ δεινὰ κάναγκαῖα μὴ πράσσειν κακά;*) (*Med*. 1242-3). Therefore, it is more accurate to argue that Medea becomes the appointed executioner of her two sons not solely because she gave them life, but because overpowering feelings of vengeance have seized complete control over her.

In comparing these Euripidean extracts to the corresponding passage in *By the Bog of Cats*, one is struck by the totally different approach that Hester adopts in her final words to Josie before taking her life:

> Hester: Alright, alright! Shhh! (*Picks her up*.) It's alright, I'll take ya with me, I won't have ya as I was, waitin' a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don't, Josie, they don't. It's alright. Close your eyes.
> *Josie closes her eyes*.
> Are they closed tight?
> Josie: Yeah.
> *Hester Cuts Josie's throat in one savage moment*.
> (*softly*) Mam – Mam – (*And Josie dies in Hester's arms*.) (*BC*: 75)

Surely, Hester's phrase "I'll take ya with me" stands out. By proclaiming that she will bring Josie with her, Hester not only exposes that she is aware that her own death is imminent, but also that killing Josie was not part of her initial plot of revenge against Carthage, which basically consisted of burning his house and livestock. Until now, the potential significance of her daughter's death seems to have never crossed Hester's mind. Only gradually does Hester discover that taking Josie with her to the other world is for Josie's own benefit. Deep down, Hester dreads leaving Josie vulnerable among the settled community, from whom both have relentlessly suffered. But foremostly, Hester does not want her daughter to experience the same anguish of waiting for an absent parent, as she did with Big Josie throughout her life. Fearing that the pattern of maternal abandonment may be repeated if she dies alone in the presence of her seven-year-old daughter, Hester instinctively believes that 'the motherliest thing to do' is for both of them to die, rather than be violently separated.

Compared to the Euripidean tragedy, Carr redefines the grounds on which the killing of a child by its mother takes place. In contrast to the Jason-obsessed Medea, and even though it may seem paradoxical, Hester places the well-being of her daughter as her top priority when she chooses to take her along. As Karen O'Brien argues:

> Hester's purpose for killing her daughter, Josie, is multifaceted. It is not simply an act of revenge or resistance. Hester's slaying of Josie is motivated, moreover, by her indistinctive need to protect Josie in the future from the self-interested Carthages and child molesting Xaviers of the world… As a result, Hester kills Josie in a desperate attempt to hold on to something of her own. Hester's killing of Josie overall emphasizes the mother-daughter bond, whereas Medea's murder of her two sons is a subversive act to destroy the father-son bond and relegate Jason to the broken emotional state of the perceived stereotype of woman. (2012: 167-8)

From an odd yet quite tenable perspective, the murder of Josie can be understood as an act of 'ultimate love'.[44] Hester fully comprehends her own sense of abandonment only when she comes to the realization that Josie's life is predetermined to follow a similar path: "Hester slays the daughter and it is a curiously protective device. Hester knows her own pain and can articulate her mother's absence as the principal source of it" (Jordan 2002: 249). Hester can predict the pain that would grow in Josie's heart if she were to be unassisted all her remaining life, and hence decides to kill.

What sets Hester apart is her belief that despite killing Josie, their connection remains unbreakable, as though they will remain united forever, and that their shared death is the sole gateway to such liberation. Correspondingly, one final vindication as to why Hester's crime must be regarded otherwise than Medea's is located in Hester's last words, which happen to be identical to what Josie muttered before her: "Mam – Mam –" (*BC*: 77). "The (dis)connection Hester has had all her life with her mother, along with the immediate motherly action she must take to safeguard her daughter against the very same destiny, render filicide a shocking yet somehow valid aspect of motherhood" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2022: 14). The daughter who was once abandoned by her mother, now a mother herself, vehemently rejects subjecting her own daughter to a similar fate.

As for Hester's suicide, Carr leaves no room for one to think of it as anticlimactic or as retaining an element of weakness when compared to the Medean precursor. Hester kills herself because she considers her death as the only getaway to remain unbroken with her daughter. Faced with the ongoing threats from Carthage and his gang, who threaten to abduct Josie and expel Hester from the community, their mutual death becomes the only recourse they have, if they want to preserve their bond. After all, Hester's stance towards filicide is informed by a vocabulary of unification, not separation. When Hester goes to bid goodbye, Josie's wish resonates crystal-clear:

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[44] Trying to establish a causal link between the emerging theatrical interest in adapting *Medea* and the given Irish social realities at the time, John McDonagh highlights that "In Ireland in the year 2000 six children died at the hands of a suicidal parent and the average murder rate for children (classed as under eighteen years old) in the state over the past four years stands at six. The taking of children by a suicidal parent is an occurrence that brings the often bizarre nature of parental love into sharp focus and can, in certain circumstances, be regarded as an act of ultimate love" (2002: 218).

"Ah Mam, I want to be where you'll be… Just take me with ya, Mam… No, Mam, stop! I'm goin' with ya!" (*Ibid*. 74-5). Cutting her throat, Hester finally fulfils Josie's demand that she accompanies her wherever she goes.

In direct contrast, during the single verbal exchange Medea's children have with each other, they display their anguish to steer clear of their mother:

> First Child: Alas! What shall I do? How can I evade my mother's hand?
> Second Child: I do not know, dearest brother. We are set to die.
>
> Παῖς α: οἴμοι, τί δράσω; ποῖ φύγω μητρὸς χέρας;
> Παῖς β: οὐκ οἶδ', ἄδελφε φίλτατ': ὀλλύμεσθα γάρ. (*Med*. 1271-2)

The disparity between the two parallel episodes is striking: Josie pleads to be held by her mother's hand, while Medea's children, fearful of Medea's lethal hand, grieve their entrapment beneath her control. The distinctly contrasting emotional responses that the respective victims exhibit adds up to the contrasting exposition of filicide between source text and Irish re-envision.

A final point of interest is that Medea kills her children only when she secures an escape plan. She has an agreement with Aegeus, the Athenian king, who promises to protect her in exchange of her assistance in ending his childlessness. It is only after she has this exit strategy in place that Medea decides to put her plan into action:

> O Zeus and Zeus's Justice, o Sun's light, now, my friends, I will pass victorious over my enemies. I am walking on the right path. Now I confidently expect that my enemies will pay the injury. Because this man [Aegeus], the very moment I was ready to sink, has appeared like a harbour for my plans. From him I will lash my ship's cable, once I go to the city of Pallas Athena. Now I will tell you all the things I have planned.
>
> ὦ Ζεῦ Δίκη τε Ζηνὸς Ἡλίου τε φῶς, νῦν καλλίνικοι τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν, φίλαι, γενησόμεσθα κείς ὁδὸν βεβήκαμεν, νῦν ἐλπὶς ἐχθροὺς τοὺς ἐμοὺς τείσειν δίκην. οὗτος γὰρ ἀνὴρ ᾗ μάλιστ' ἐκάμνομεν λιμὴν πέφανται τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων: ἐκ τοῦδ' ἀναψόμεσθα πρυμνήτην κάλων, μολόντες ἄστυ καὶ πόλισμα Παλλάδος. ἤδη δὲ πάντα τἀμά σοι βουλεύματα λέξω (*Med*. 764-73).

Medea commits filicide with the knowledge that there is a safe haven for her afterward. Medea does not take up arms, until she is certain that she will escape and be left unpunished for her crime. Medea proves ultra-cautious about not spreading the details of her payback against Jason, withholding her ire until she finds the proper escape hatch.

Hester's finale, for its part, could also be understood as an escape story, though from an alternative perspective. Hester kills Josie, and seconds after, drops dead in the same spot. Contrary then to Euripides, Carr does not separate death and escape as distinct, sequential events; instead, she presents them as two facets of the same coin. "It's because ya wanted to come, Josie" (*BC*: 76), Hester whispers to Josie when she dies in her arms. Immediately after, Hester commits suicide. "You're late, ya came too late… Take me away, take me away from here" (*Ibid*. 77), Hester reprimands Ghost Fancier, when he arrives to assist in her suicide. The moments between her daughter's death and her own are excruciating, as Hester impatiently yearns to reunite with Josie in their shared escape through death.

Escape in *By the Bog of Cats* is rendered symbolic rather than literal, subterranean rather than manifest, shared instead of personal. Death is evaluated as an extreme form of escapism that both the mother and daughter are compelled to pursue if they wish to remain together. Consequently, when compared to Medea's soaring through the skies on a dragon chariot, Hester's suicide can also be seen as a credible form of triumphant escape, albeit *in union*, not *by separation*.

To Whom This Land Belongs: Masculine *vs.* Feminine Land Perspectives

In this section, we will delve into how the central themes of 'Land' and 'Landscape' are developed in *By the Bog of Cats*. It will be argued that these two notions promote a reading of Carr's play that is intimately Irish, bringing into the surface tangible concerns about the clashing relationship that polarizing groups of the Midlands population have with their native environment. The outcome of this investigation aims to reveal the integration of Carr's play into a strongly Irish setting, pretty much responsible for concealing from the original audience the affinity that *By the Bog of Cats* has with *Medea*. From the early image of Hester dragging the dead black swan, all the way to the succeeding deaths of Hester and Josie, the notions of 'Land' and 'Landscape' have resurfaced consistently. We have particularly delved into the land and bogscape of the Irish Midlands, considering a multitude of diverse aspects, including the geographical location and morphological features of the bog, its symbolic significance, the superstitions associated with it, the creatures that inhabit it, and its role in Irish mythology, history, and literature.

Hester's experience of maternal abandonment is deeply etched into the terrain and scenery of the bog. When stripped off all defence mechanisms, Hester confesses the bitter truth to her enemies: "I can't go till me mother comes. I'd hope she'd have come before now and it wouldn't come to this. Don't make me lave or somethin' terrible'll happen." (*BC*: 52). Presumably, all the calamity in Carr's play originates from Hester's violent expulsion from her motherland. Hester has sworn that she will never move away from the territory of the bog, unless her mother comes back: "I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I'll watch her return" (*Ibid*. 34). This traumatic experience of watching a loved one's departure, together with the endless waiting that this departure presupposes, are two characteristic acts binding the female lineage of the Swane family together. First, it is Big Josie, who sentences Hester to a continuous state of watching and waiting. Then, it is Josie's turn to tell Hester that "Mam, I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return" (BC: 75). When Hester hears from Josie's mouth the same futile oaths that she had once taken regarding the absent matriarch of the family, she can no longer ignore the regrettable resemblance and takes action.

For Hester, the terrain of the bog is a constant reminder of her mother's absence. Hester has internalized the trauma of lacking a mother figure by assigning 'motherly' sentiments and meaning to her surroundings. The bogland has truly become Hester's motherland: Hester has created an idealized scenario in her mind that the bog's landscape somehow preserves her mother's memory. As Gladwin notes: "Hester depends upon the bog to reincarnate the memory of her remote past, in the hope that her mother will indeed come back to her… She has memorialised her mother by creating an alternative reality of *what if* rather than *what is*" (2011: 393). Perceived

from this angle, the Midlands bogscape is no longer a sheer sum of its physical realities but a terrain imbued with Hester's subconscious; a transcendental panorama of unresolved and unattained desires.

Within this scheme, the bog site serves as a significant marker intimately tied to the individual who neglected to raise and nurture Hester. "It's still like she only walked away yesterday" (*BC*: 61), she confesses to Monica. "Clearly, the Bog has acquired mythological properties for Hester: in lieu of Big Josie's physical reappearance, the Bog has been transformed into a symbolic imprint of her anticipated return" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2022: 12). "I so much wanted her to see that I had flourished without her and maybe then I could forgive her" (*BC*. 73), comprises Hester's fondest wish that regrettably never materializes. Hester falsely believes that she can still trail Big Josie's footsteps within the bog. This explains her persistent wandering and her unwavering determination to remain within the bog's boundaries. Placing Hester in a constant search for Big Josie's trace, "Carr captures her confusion about her mother, her capacity to idolize the individual who has wounded her the most, the need to seek reinforcement and encouragement against that sense of let-down she once was scared by" (Jordan 2002: 259). This incessant trailing for her mother informs Hester's sense of self. "The Bog of Cats is for Hester a protracted yet indispensable feature of her identity; it is simultaneously a safehouse and a place of self-formation" (Kentrotis Zinelis 2022: 7), an excruciating place to behold and a site of self-formation.

Hester has developed an unconventional way of understanding and associating with her surroundings. This implies her significantly distinct perception of the land and landscape of the Bog of Cats compared to the other characters in the play, particularly her male antagonists, Carthage and Xavier Cassidy. For them, the bogland represents ownership rights, contractual agreements, and profitability per acre. For Hester, in contrast, land ownership is not founded on a feudal-like system of accumulating wealth and paperwork. Instead, it is determined by one's innate understanding of the land, encompassing its terrain, fauna, and specific environmental traits. As will be argued, Hester displays a primordial cognizance of land, deviating from conventional notions of ownership by embracing *tír*, the old Irish word for 'land' and 'country', as a trope.[45]

[45] In Irish mythology, *Tír na nÓg* ('the land of youth') is the name for the Celtic Otherworld. It is a place of abundance, happiness, and eternal youth. The most famous mythic account of *Tír na nÓg* is the tale of the mortal hero Oisin, who falls in love with Niamh, the red-headed daughter of the king of *Tír na nÓg*, and decides to follow her there. W. B. Yeats's 'The Wanderings of Oisin', the introductory poem of his first poetry collection *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889), imagines the dialogue that an aged Oisin has with St. Patrick, the missionary traditionally considered responsible for converting pagan Ireland to Christianity. In there, Oisin, after he has come back from his three-hundred-year sojourn to *Tír na nÓg*, shares with St. Patrick his experiences about the Otherworld realm. The allegory of an emblematic Celtic hero in discussion with the Patron Saint of Ireland highlights Ireland's double posture as a place that apart from the Christian Kingdom of God, there is also a magical realm sustained by myth, part of which is *Tír na*

Upon witnessing the play, one quickly realizes that in the Bog of Cats universe, the inhabitants have two mutually exclusive ways of relating to the land:

> To show how land possession serves as an instrument of patriarchal oppression, Carr propels two mutually-exclusive theories regarding the interaction that the Irish locals have with the land of the Bog. One could label these conflicting perspectives in traditional, gendered terms. The 'masculine' perspective would be the dominant members of the settled community such as Xavier Cassidy, Carthage's aspiration and the motivation for his marriage, and even women such as Mrs Kilbride, who, for the sake of their personal interests, have sided with these dominant men. For those sharing this perspective, ownership of land follows capitalist conventions: a hereditary system of lordship over the land and a contract-based scheme of exchange where land translates directly into currency. The 'feminine' viewpoint, on the other hand, is principally shared by unsettled inhabitants of the Bog such as Hester Swane, the quasi-deranged Catwoman, and men from the settled community who fail to sustain their prescribed role. One such man is Father Willow, an erratic priest with a soft spot for women and booze, who, when asked to say the grace in Carthage's wedding, outrageously retorts: 'The grace, yes, how does it go again?' (*BC*. 48). These outsiders share the belief that land ownership is essentially measured according to the amount of freedom of movement which one has within its premises, and the extent of familiarity one has with the land, its flora, and its fauna.[46] (Kentrotis Zinelis 2022: 8-9)

Men work the land in daylight, while women walk the bog at night. Hester's words are indicative: "I wasn't in the caravan last night. I was walkin' the bog" (*BC*. 27). The freedom that the unsettled female characters claim for themselves, namely the right to be unrestricted but still perceived as an indisputable component of the Bog of Cats ecosystem, is documented by the right of unconstrained movement. Working the land, on the other hand, has the opposite effect; it limits personal freedoms, since physical labour is seen by the adherents of the 'masculine' view as confining people to the land, for the sake of those who own the land. As Xavier threatens Hester

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nÓg. In *By the Bog of Cats*, Carr also promotes the idea of the simultaneous existence of pagan and Christian beliefs in today's Ireland, exemplified by the close association of Catwoman with Father Willow. The two characters, the one possessing pagan traits and the other a Catholic priest, are quite fond of each other with an erotic tension permeating the atmosphere: "Catwoman: We should go on a holiday, you and me, Father Willow… Father Willow: Well, where do ya want to go and I'll book the tickets in the mornin'?" (*BC*: 43). Based on all this, it is not too far-fetched to claim that when Hester decides to take Josie with her "somewhere ya can never return from" (*Ibid*. 74), this could very well be *Tír na nÓg*, a place where Hester and Josie would finally find joy.

[46] Hélène Lecossois correspondingly argues: "The land Hester belongs to is wild, untamed and is no-one's property; the land Xavier is interested in is tilled farmland. An opposition between two conflicting sets of values is thus uncovered and points to one of the play's major tensions. Archaic values embodied by Hester and Catwoman, whose name highlights the strong tie that unites her to the Bog of Cats, stand in sharp contrast to more recent, mercantile values in which Xavier, and Carthage for that matter, believe" (2012: 75).

about what the future might hold for Josie and her yet unborn grandchildren: "And who's to say but maybe your little bastard and her offspring won' be farmin' my land in years to come" (*IbId*. 65). So, the first thing to note is the radically different prioritization concerning what one is expected to do with land: the 'feminine' side thrusts one to walk it to get familiarized with it, whereas the 'masculine' party only understands land in terms of sweat and toil. Given the two understandings, interaction with land can be either a source of empowerment or a means of control.

Reading *By the Bog of Cats*, one discovers several instances where the conflicting characters show awareness of what the land means to the opposing side. For instance, when Hester has a brief private discussion with Caroline, Carthage's soon-to-be wife, Hester rages about the suffered injustice of having lost her partner to Caroline mentioning that "It was me who tould him he could do better. It was my money that bought his first fine acres" (*Ibid*. 21).[47] By offering money to Carthage to buy a piece of land to build his house, Hester momentarily renounces her Traveller status, falsely hoping that such capitulation would ensure Carthage's pledge of supporting his family. Instead, what Hester accomplishes is to accelerate Carthage's breakout and his absorption by the settled community, as he fully embraces the 'masculine' view on land. Bizarrely, by sponsoring Carthage to become a proprietor of confined land, Hester finds herself excluded from all Bog of Cats.

Moreover, Caroline, unaware that, being the subject of transaction between the Cassidys and the Killbrides, she is also a victim of the 'masculine' inheritance system, is willing to bribe Hester for her to withdraw: "Look, I'll give ya more money if ya'll only go. Here's me bank book, there's nearly nineteen thousand pounds in it, me inheritance from me mother. Daddy gave it to me this mornin'. Ya can have it, only please go" (*Ibid*. 21). Hester is not attracted by this offer. She has bitterly realized that supporting Carthage with money was the beginning of her downfall. When she finally unmasks Carthage, the damage is already done: "You're sellin' me and Josie down the river for a few lumpy auld acres and notions of respectability" (*Ibid*. 26), comprises Hester's cynical verdict. In fact, after having secured his future, Carthage makes the petty gesture of trying to return Hester's money back: "There's your blood money. It's all there down to the last penny" (*Ibid*. 28). Hester, however, does not succumb, later showing in Carthage's wedding with an envelope: "There's your auld blood money back. Ya think you're gettin' away that aisy! Money

[47] Hester cannot forgive Carthage for his ingratitude. "He'd be nothin' today if it wasn't for me" (*BC*: 6), she professes about him. She then moves on enumerating how by offering him her body and money, she converted Carthage from "a slavish pup" (*Ibid*. 21) to a "land-hungry mongrel" (*Ibid*. 27). The pattern of registering one by one all the benevolences done to a disloyal husband is also encountered in Euripides' tragedy, where Medea gives a speech to Jason telling him how she saved his life by protecting him from the fire-breathing bulls, how she killed the dragon that was keeping guard of the Golden Fleece, how she left her father and home to follow Jason in Iolcus, and how she murdered Pelias there (*Med*. 475-89).

won't take that guilt away, Carthage, we'll go to our grave with it" (*Ibid*. 52). With this powerful image, Carr offers a scathing critique of the dominant 'masculine' view where land is seen as currency, with money possession and land control being inextricably linked.

Compared to *Medea*, where Jason marries for security, in *By the Bog of Cats* Carthage marries for land: "Carthage is not just marring another woman; he's entering this land-grabbing, gombeen society. So that Hester's rage is also a cultural rage, of a colonized culture which is being driven out, not allowed to exist" (Fouéré 2003: 169-70). This assertion requires further contemplation. For instance, one remembers Hester's bold avowal in the play that "The truth is you want to eradicate me, make out I never existed" (*BC*: 51). On a larger scale, Hester's dire proclamation calls to mind the resounding voice of a colonized people standing up to of the colonizer. As Kader proposes:

> Hester's and Xavier's dispute recalls the greater dispute that arose between the native Irish (as well as many other cultures) and the British forces in the era of colonization. In pre-colonial Ireland, ownership was not determined by legal paperwork but by familial connection to a piece of land. Such a family and tradition-based claim in the face of laws, deeds, and governmental paperwork is flimsy. Unfortunately for Hester, as it was for the native landowners, such claims simply do not hold up in the modern world. (2005: 183)

What Kader highlights about the contrasting views of land between the native Irish and the British colonizers, as well as the resulting conflicts, is clearly reflected in the play:

> Hester: This is my property and I've right to sit in me own yard without bein' ogled by the likes of you.
> Xavier. This is no longer your property and well ya know it, ya signed it over six months ago, for a fine hefty sum, have the papers here.
> Hester: I wasn't thinkin' right then, was bein' coerced and bullied from all sides, but I have regained me pride and it tells me I'm stayin'. Ya'll get your money back. (*BC*: 30-31).

Although Xavier Cassidy is not British, he belongs to the ruling class, as he has effectively assimilated the doctrine of contractual ownership of land and exercises his power accordingly.[48]

[48] Cassidy is a common Irish surname, basically the anglicized spelling of the original Gaelic O'Caiside, with the 'O' prefix meaning 'male descendant' and 'Caiside' being a nickname form for 'cas' signifying 'curly hair'. The fact that only the anglicized version of the name is in circulation, indicates the all-round impact that the British occupation has had in Irish life, especially in the domain of nomenclature. Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), a play that observes the systematic turning of Irish names for local towns, rivers, and other place names into made-up anglicized equivalents by the British cartographers of the Ordnance Survey during the first half of the 19th century, is an obvious example of the vast sway that British cultural imperialism has had in Ireland, and how this becomes manifested in the sphere of language.

For the class he represents, once a transaction is complete, there is no point of return. Hester's crying out that "I'm going nowhere. This here is my house and my garden and my stretch of the bog" (*Ibid*. 6), sounds whimsical and hollow to him. According to his sombre understanding of human interactions, a signature cannot be toppled by any sentiments of regret.

Diametrically opposed, Hester dismisses all formal agreements, claiming instead an inherent right to the land she occupies: "Bits of paper, writin', means nothin', can as aisy be unsinged" (*Ibid*. 20), she speaks of land contracts questioning their real value. Hester cannot accept that administrative processes and an unjust real estate system have eroded people's pristine connection to their motherland. Hester believes that she has an inherent right to remain in the Bog of Cats, and rather than possessing a specific plot of land, she feels a deep connection to the entire bogland: "I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end me days. I've as much right to this place as any of yees, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees" (*Ibid*. 27). The last sentence captures Hester's unshakable conviction that she retains an intrinsic claim to ownership superseding any legal appeals. It is the bog that holds Hester, and not herself who controls this relationship.

Overall, the two conflicting views on land spawn an unbridgeable dissonance: "Hester's words are a discourse about life and death, past and future tragedies, mysterious forces and magnetic attraction. Conversely the Cassidy family is only concerned with money; the land as a place valued solely for its monetary worth only generates relentless bestiality and greed" (Dumay 2001: 207). Under this system, for Xavier, signing a document to acquire some land is the sole path to legitimacy: "There's nothin' besides land, boy, nothin'! A real farmer would never think otherwise" (*BC*: 69). Self-absorbed and arrogant as he is, Xavier believes that everyone thinks like him: "He loves the land and like me he'd rather die than part with it wance he gets his greedy hands on it" (*Ibid*. 65), he predicts of Carthage. Finally, Xavier causally connects land ownership to the idea of having a voice and making decisions. His ghastly statement about Hester that "if she was mine I'd cut that tinker tongue from her mouth" (*Ibid*. 68), concedes the whole truth about how asymmetrically the 'masculine' land model perceives interpersonal relationships with anyone that stands in opposition. Xavier misogynistically announces that just like the land, women can belong to him. He also expresses his desire to silence Hester, as if her perceived landlessness precludes her from voicing her opinions. Xavier believes land ownership and the freedom of speech are interwoven; two inseparable components essential for maintaining the *status quo*.

Moving on, the premises of 'feminine' land proprietorship come from an entirely distinct and unconventional tie with land. Opposite to the 'masculine' model, the bond with land does not translate to a contract, nor paying money is a precondition for possession. This time, the prerequisite of belonging to Bog of Cats flouts any materialistic conceptualization of land, since

the proposed model is built upon an epistemological nexus involving the interrelated notions of movement, memory, and knowledge. In a nutshell, the motto of the 'feminine' relationship with land could be that 'to know is to own'. Catwoman's words set the tone: "I know everythin' that happens on this bog. I'm the Keeper of the Bog of Cats in case ya forgotten. I own this bog" (*Ibid*. 9). This way, Catwoman fashions herself as a caretaker of the bog; as the all-seeing guardian of the bogland territory, rather than simply the owner of a particular piece of its land. By being "the Keeper of the Bog of Cats", Catwoman acts as the conservator of the memory and history that lies beneath the bog's surface.

Curiously, it is not only the past that Catwoman knows and safeguards but, through her unique connection with the land, she also can foresee the future. For example, on one occasion, Catwoman instructs Hester: "Lave this place now or ya never will… Sure I know that too. Seen it writ in a bog hole" (*Ibid*. 14). In addition to serving as a repository of past histories, the bog can reveal the future to those with the necessary expertise. Catwoman possesses memories of the past and insights into the future, while her land ownership is not exclusive to others. According to the 'feminine' landview, land tenure does not revolve around the individual but is shared among the people of the tribe. Possession equals knowledge, and knowledge is inherently communal.

To elaborate this further, the manifestation of the 'feminine' attitude towards land ownership is further expounded in Hester's peculiar attempt to justify her sense of belonging to the Bog of Cats. Hester decidedly circumvents any legal binding, asserting that the right to belong in the Bog of Cats is determined by one's knowledge of the area's landscape and plant life:

> I was born on the Bog of Cats, same as all of yees, though ya'd never think in the way yees shun me. I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue. I could lead yees around the Bog of Cats in me sleep. (*Ibid*. 50-1).

The way that Hester defends herself when faced with the peril of ostracization is remarkable. Hester makes a heretical appeal to her knowledge of the bog's landscape. Like Catwoman, she puts forward an epistemological argument fortifying her sense of belonging: the acquaintance with the smell and taste of herbs, knowing all bog's pathways by heart, its actual size as well as its hidden corners and geological abnormalities, altogether contribute to the elevation of Hester as a rightful dweller of the bog. In fact, within this epistemic model that interlinks notions of movement, memory, and knowledge, one could reasonably argue that Hester is the quintessential inhabitant of the Bog of Cats: her outstanding familiarity with the bog's terrain, her innate ability to navigate its grounds, and her profound memory of the bog's plant life, all promote Hester as s a vigorous participant in the natural processes supervening the area.

In fact, there are instances in the play where Hester appears to speak on behalf of the bog. After setting fire to Carthage's property, she declares: "Let the bog have it back. Never liked that house anyway" (*Ibid*. 59). Her demeanour suggests that she is acting in accordance with the bog's impending desires, as if the bog itself has determined that Carthage's house and livestock should be destroyed, and Hester is merely the obedient agent carrying out this task. In a broader sense, the house, cattle, and crops embody a man's connection to the land – his possession and a parallel for patriarchal structure. The unexploited bog, on the other hand, is sketched as a feminine zone of freedom. Accordingly, the image of the bog absorbing the house is a powerful indicator of where Carr places her sympathies: here the 'masculine' symbol of the house becomes immersed within the 'feminine' symbol of the bog as simultaneously a tomb and womb.

Hester proclaims that she abides to a set of rules that is more ancient, and hence more valid than contract-based engagement with land. This special bond that Hester has with her motherland, a land epistemology that is apparently way older than the 'masculine' dealings, could be associated with a particular body of Irish texts. As Helen Lojek first argued: "her relationship to the bog illustrates the ancient Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas*, the lore of places that 'knows' them not just by name and location but by history and proximity" (2011: 71). To explain further, *dinnseanchas* (or *dindsenchas*) is the name of a body of texts from early Irish literature collected together during the 12th century, detailing the onomastic origins of place-names, and also including stories about the traditions, events, and characters connected with the transcribed locations.[49] The *Dinnseanchas* depends heavily on a formulaic language, with a large portion of them sharing the same introductory line of asking where this name-place comes from, and then immediately comes the reply that this is easy to answer. For instance: *Dubad, whence the name? Not hard to say* or *Slaine, whence the name? Not hard to say*. Originally a product of oral tradition, with the majority of them being written in verse, *dinnseanchas* used to be recited by bards as a compendium for cultural cohesion and a form of entertainment.

Similarly, in *By the Bog of Cats*, Catwoman reminisces about Big Josie: "Ya'd often hear her voice comin' over the bog at night. She was the greatest song stitcher ever to have passed through this place and we've had plenty pass through but none like Josie Swane" (*BC*: 13). Just like the Gaelic bards travelling around Ireland reciting the *dinnseanchas*, Big Josie could equally be imagined as celebrating in her songs the lore of Bog of Cats, its topography, legends, and mythic characters, by stitching and singing verses on the spot. A possessor of great knowledge regarding the history and genealogy of Bog of Cats, Hester's mother could be rightfully considered as the matriarch of the 'feminine' theorizing of land. A sense of land that is archaic and mystical, and to which one does more justice when embracing it using the Gaelic word *tír*, than when associating

[49] The best translated account of *dinnseanchas* in English is E. J. Gwynn's five volume *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, printed between 1903 and 1935.

it with a capitalist terminology based on proprietary, financial, and contractual arrangements. Big Josie, like Catwoman and Hester, serve as custodians of an intangible cultural heritage, as is the lore of the Midlands bogland.

Now, when one contrasts Big Josie's departure from the Bog of Cats with her role as guardian of the bog's cultural memory, it is impossible to ignore the emerging symbolism. Indeed, one begins to consider whether Big Josie was forcibly expelled from the bog rather than leaving voluntarily. As argued before, men want to *possess* the land. In contrast, for women like Hester, Catwoman, and Big Josie, *to know* the land is what they long for. This profound connection with the bog's natural environment finds room for expression on a level of language that is unknown to the supporters of the 'masculine' landview, and, for this reason, is perceived as a threat. In her songs, Big Josie speaks an eternal vocabulary of attachment and unity that is incompatible with Xavier's commitment to land partition, stirred, as it were, by vulgar sentiments of personal interest. Xavier's memory of Big Josie "croonin' towards Orion in a language I never heard before or since. We'd peace when she left" (*Ibid*. 31), captures the 'masculine' inability to grasp the 'feminine' view of the land, as well as bringing to the fore the mandate for its elimination. To communicate in a way that others do not comprehend, to sing when others only respond to the sterile prose of money deals and contracts, is reason enough for conflict.

Taken as an allegory then, Big Josie's vanishment from the Bog of Cats initiates the gradual erosion of the 'feminine' values associated with the land. The *dinnseanchas* of the Bog of Cats has been deliberately erased by the settled residents, whose interest lies in making people forget their ancestral roots and the communal feelings associated with a primordial connection to the Irish landscape. Besides, one is inclined to extrapolate Hester's mourning for her absent mother, not simply as the mishap of an orphaned girl, but as representative of a collective loss, namely that of Irish natives for their motherland, of the non-conforming to the free-market folkways attached to the land that have been trampled down by a stateless machinery gauging the earth, inch by inch, fueled by a voracious yearning for profit and power.

Catwoman, Big Josie, and Hester, suffer by inhabiting a hostile environment where there is no correspondence between their idea of self and the actual experience of living. By recognizing the suffering endured by these female characters, Big Josie is no longer solely seen as a heartless mother, whereas Hester's subsequent acts of filicide and suicide take on a new perspective. Hester kills Josie and takes her own life to escape the hegemony of the 'masculine' ideals that dominate the Bog of Cats, saving both from the prospects of a literally unnatural life. By choosing death, Hester inaugurates a portal of escape from the male-dominated bogland, a feat quite comparable to Big Josie's self-exile. "What I wanted was somewan to look me in the eye and know I was understood and not judged" (*Ibid*. 74), bitterly exclaims Hester, a sentiment probably espoused by all female characters of the play.

As for Hester's last angry words before meeting death, they are directed at Carthage, seen as the traitor of the 'feminine' land ideals and inheritor of Xavier's position within the settled community:

> Ya won't forget me now, Carthage, and when all of this is over or half remembered and you think you've almost forgotten me again, take a walk along the Bog of Cats and wait for a purlin' wind through your hair or a soft breath be your ear or a rustle behind ya. That'll be me and Josie ghostin' ya. (*Ibid*. 77)

Hester does not reproach Carthage with a medley of swear words and brutal gestures, but instead curses him to *remember*. Memory, which according to the 'feminine' landview is a synonym for knowledge and is also linked to the kind of land possession Hester believes in, becomes a weapon in Hester's hands to end Carthage. A perpetual state of remembering is the price that Carthage must pay for betraying Hester. Carthage, hoping that by achieving Hester's exile, he would be done with her once and for all, is caught unprepared. Although Hester and Josie will soon cease to be physically present in the bog, their omnipresent aura will endure; a possibility that Carthage had not fully considered. Hester condemns Carthage to assume the 'feminine' role of wandering the Bog of Cats territory, and, wherever he goes, to sense the presence of his betrayed partner and their child.

Violating Hester's wishes and scorning the 'feminine' perspective of land ownership, Carthage's punishment is to *know* his fault, as he *remembers* those he let down, while he *walks* the bog. As a result, the three interrelated notions of movement, memory, and knowledge encapsulating the 'feminine' rule of land are now cast upon Carthage as a retribution for his crimes. Soon, Hester and Josie will become ghosts, haunting Carthage, and imparting a bitter lesson for his "bull-headed pride and economy and painful advancement" (*Ibid*. 71). Soaked in earth, dispersed in the wind, hidden inside bog holes, in-between the crops of barley, the spirits of Hester and Josie will keep a vigilant watch over Carthage. With their phantasmagoric presence, Hester and Josie will preside over the landscape of the Bog of Cats. As a result, Carr's play concludes with mother and daughter undergoing a transformation into something ethereal yet strangely tangible, merging seamlessly as integral components of the bog's universe.

Hester as a Female Irish Icon: The Maternal Landscape of *By the Bog of Cats*

Reaching the end of this chapter, one may notice that the deeper one gets into the analysis of *By the Bog of Cats*, the less transparent its thematic affinity to the Medean precursor becomes. While the primary focus of this chapter was to establish an unmistakable connection between Greek tragedy and Irish adaptation, as the analysis of *By the Bog of Cats* progressed, one might notice a reduced number of references to Euripides, whereas a close reading of Carr's play reveals a profound sense of being deeply rooted in Ireland. For instance, the play's emphasis on the prevalence of *tír* as the conceptual foundation where all action unfolds, along with the mention of *dinnseanchas* as a unique Irish folk tradition to which the female protagonists of the play are spiritually attached, are two compelling indicators suggesting the embeddedness of Carr's play in Irish culture. Moreover, the contrasting yet all-encompassing ties that bind all play's characters to the bogland, the magnetism of the peculiar Midlands bogscape subduing everyone under its clout, and the demonstrated futility of envisioning a life beyond the limits of Bog of Cats, collectively paint *By the Bog of Cats* as an undeniably Irish play.

In fact, it is the introduction of Medean themes into an Irish domain, that is, into a gendered landscape or, more accurately, into a feminized space of ritual sacrifice, that contributes to the emergence of *By the Bog of Cats* as a quintessentially Irish play. Curiously, there is a Greek explanation behind this. Discussing borderland spaces in classical Athens, Jeremy McInerney mentions that "Marginal territory is gendered female through a series of associations with female gods and cults directed at women, thereby reinforcing the gendering of civic space as male. Accordingly, wild terrain and wild woman are categories that reinforce each other" (2006: 33). This contention could also be applied to Carr's play, where the development of disruptive female characters like Hester, Catwoman, and Big Josie profoundly 'feminizes' the bog landscape, absorbing the 'masculine' civic space of the settled community. Following this line of thought, the untamed female population's wilderness is intertwined with the marginal landscape of the bogland.

Having thus uncovered the numerous Irish elements within Carr's play, one could reasonably describe *By the Bog of* Cats as a distinctly Irish endeavour. It stands as a theatrical work firmly rooted in the ongoing literary tradition of Ireland and fully integrated into the native historical and cultural framework. To illustrate this point further, in this section we will contrast Hester Swane with an iconic Irish theatrical heroine, Kathleen ni Houlihan, from the eponymous 1902 play by W.B Yeats and Lady Gregory. In the Irish collective imagination, Kathleen ni Houlihan is a heroine who serves as a symbolic representation of Mother Ireland and the Irish nation. As we explore the relationship between the two heroines, I will demonstrate how Hester Swane emerges as a new archetype of the Irish woman.

To start, the notions of 'Irish Land' and 'Irish Mother' are inextricably linked to each other. As Richard Kearny notes:

> The mythological motherland serve[s] as a goddess of sovereignty who, at least at the imaginary level, might restore a lost national identity by summoning her sons to the sacred rite of renewal through sacrifice. So doing, the Irish people might re-enter the sacred time which transcends historical time, thereby undoing the wrongs of history. Where reality indicated division and dispossession, myth provided an answering poetics of unity and sovereignty. (1997: 91)

This sacred imaginary place, so dear to the Irish, of which Kearney speaks, is also depicted in *By the Bog Cats*. Throughout the play, there is a song that Josie repeatedly sings. The words of the last stanza are as follows:

> To the Bog of Cats I one day will return,
> In mortal form or in ghostly form,
> And I will find you there and there with you sojourn,
> Forever by the Bog of Cats, my darling one. (*BC*: 8)

Josie croons about a longed-for comeback journey to the realm of the bog, as if it were a maternal womb she desires to return to. Despite the Bog of Cats being mentioned twice, there is an intriguing sense of vagueness in the song's verses, presenting it as something more than just a geographical location, almost like a mythical place. In fact, Josie's admittance of a certain instinct propelling her, even in spectral form if needed, to sojourn to a magical place unrestricted by space and time, is intricately linked to the interdependent notions of 'Irish Land' and 'Irish Mother'. Josie's song evokes this association, whereas her death in the end of the play stresses the need for renewal through sacrifice. However, in Carr's play, instead of sons, Hester and Josie are Ireland's daughters; the women of the bog as sacrificial offering, establishing a matrilineal tradition of martyrdom. Arguably then, the sketching of the landscape of Bog of Cats as a maternal domain draws from the longstanding connection between 'Irish Land' and 'Irish Mother'. As we will see, however, Carr does not merely replicate this relationship, but approaches it subversively, challenging traditional depictions of womanhood as the mirror image of the Irish nation.

W. B Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* is a well-known example where motherhood, motherland, and personal sacrifice are entangled with each other.[50] The story of the

[50] As Melissa Sihra underlines: "Since Augusta Gregory's and W. B. Yeats's 1902 drama *Kathleen ni Houlihan* it is important to interrogate the signification of 'woman' as idealized trope of nation and to look at the ways in which the work of later Irish dramatists either contests or perpetuates this legacy. The social and cultural position of women has historically been one of symbolic centrality and subjective disavowal as both colonial and nationalist ideology movements promoted feminized concepts of the nation, while subordinating women in everyday life" (2007: 1).

play is as follows: Kathleen, referred to in the play as Old Woman, arrives at the cottage of Peter Gillane's family on the eve of the 1798 Irish Rebellion. This coincides with the day that Peter's son Michael is about to get married. After being received, Kathleen is asked the reason for her prevailing grief, to which she replies: "My land that was taken from me… My four beautiful green fields" (Finneran 2002: 160). Obviously, Kathleen is Ireland personified, mourning for the four provinces that make up the island (Ulster, Leinster, Munster, and Connaught), which were abducted by the British. Kathleen informs her companions that "many a man has died for love of me… [and] if anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (*Ibid*. 161-2). Eventually Michael, moved by her plea, rejects all material goods and the love of his fiancée Delia, to sacrifice himself for the nation. Mesmerized by Kathleen's song that those who follow her "They shall be speaking for ever, | The people shall hear them for ever" (*Ibid*. 165), he breaks away from Delia and follows Kathleen to a journey of martyrdom. When his father Peter asks around if they saw "an old woman going down the path" (*Ibid*.), Patrick, Michael's younger brother, swears that "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (*Ibid*.). Thus, having mustered her sons to shed blood for her, Mother Ireland rejoices and symbolically transforms to a young aristocratic maiden.[51]

The tendency of personifying Mother Ireland cannot be overlooked, as this tendency transcends the theatrical stage and its originating mythopoetic origins, manifesting itself in historical events as well. For example, in the first lines of the Easter Proclamation of 1916, which declared Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom, the Republican revolutionary Padraic Pearse states: "In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom" (qtd. in Frost 2017: 79). While not directly referencing Kathleen ni Houlihan, one can nonetheless discern Kathleen's presence between the lines of the proclamation. What can be inferred from this is that, according to the Irish imagination, when history calls for it, the land of Ireland can assume the form of a Mother figure, demanding absolute devotion from her sons to the cause at hand.

Naturally, there is a practical rationale underpinning the enduring choice of personifying Ireland in times of necessity. Once more, as Richard Kearny points out:

[51] The transformation of Kathleen ni Houlihan from an old woman to a beautiful girl is taken from the *aisling* (dream poem) tradition: "In the *Aisling* poems of the eighteenth century, the 'hidden' Ireland was thus personified as a visionary daughter or *spéirbhean* threatened by the alien marauder (or inversely, following the same logic, as a shameless hag—*meirdreach*—who lifted her skirts for the invader's pleasure)" (Kearney 1997: 96).

> Yeats offered the myth of Mother Ireland as spiritual or symbolic compensation for the colonial calamities of historical reality. The mythological Mother would restore the lost national identity by calling her sons to sacred rite of blood-sacrifice… since reality told a story of division and dispossession, Yeats replied with answering symbols of unity and self-possession. (1984: 13-14)

By the Bog of Cats must be read against the backdrop of this nationalist tradition. The oneness of 'Motherhood' and 'Motherland', as this solidifies in Hester's mind, is indicative of an irrefutable Yeatsian trait. Indeed, inducing a gendered narrative of female representation as land, is what both playwrights seek to do. In *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, it is Ireland herself who emerges and calls for Michael's allegiance through sacrifice, whereas, in *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester willingly sacrifices herself in order to be united with the maternal domain of the bog.

Carr, however, does not merely replicate the Yeatsian concept of Irish 'Mother-Land'; instead, she strategically appropriates this familiar theme intending to subvert its meaning. Carr is aware that the elevation of woman to the mythic status of a national symbol does not come without its real-life limitations. Regarding this, Shonagh Hill recognizes the restraints placed on Irish women by the imposition of restrictive models of iconicity:

> The enduring trope of Mother Ireland has defined women's bodies as the terrain over which power has been contested, while concurrently erasing the reality of their corporeal experiences… The connection between 'woman' and nation underlines the passive feminine role as beautiful object to-be-looked-at and as stimulus to male action and martyrdom. The importance of blood sacrifice within nationalist mythology in the early twentieth century delineates Kathleen ni Houlihan as the idealized Mother Ireland and Virgin Mother who inspires the sacrifice of the male, thus rendering her without agency. Furthermore, the focus is on the mother–son relationship which supports the contract between nation and men, at the expense of all others. (2019: 4, 44)

In *By the Bog of Cats*, Carr liberates herself from the constraining limitations of the well-known Yeatsian notion of loyalty to Mother Ireland by offering a modern reinterpretation of it. One could argue that Carr effectively adapts the enduring trope of Irish 'Mother-Land' to better address the needs of women. Given the suffocating representation of women in Irish mythology and the aestheticization of death and sacrifice inherent in such imbalanced depictions, Carr, through the substitution of Kathleen ni Houlihan with Hester Swane, initiates a paradigm shift that rectifies the negative impact of pre-established national narratives on women's reality.

Through the portrayal of Hester as a Mother figure, who, instead of demanding her sons to sacrifice themselves for her sake, opts for herself and her daughter to jointly assume the role of sacrificial victims, Carr turns the tables on gender representation. This way, she challenges the hollow idealization of women as untouchable, de-sexualized entities that the Irish collective

imagination may perceive as unassailable, but, in reality, they are powerless and overlooked. As Wanda Bolzano correspondingly argues:

> The nation as woman, the woman as nation. And so the female population of Ireland has increasingly merged with the passive projection of Irishness: purely ornamental, a rhetorical element rather than an existing reality… The reification of such an abstract concept has been the main cause of the 'invisibility' of Irish women: women rendered invisible, like personal and national colonies… To this absence of a real image corresponds the absence of a voice. (1996: 92-3)

The idea of a virgin maiden, adored by all but untouched by anyone, is prevalent in the Yeatsian text: "With all the lovers that brought me their love I never set out the bed for any" (Finneran 2002: 162), Kathleen pronounces in the play. A state of virginal womanhood that transpires as imperative for the Irish collective but proves disastrous and devastating for real women.

Hester Swane is far from fitting this description. Laden with personal passions, susceptible to carnal desires, sexually betrayed, and consistently met with rejection, she is the complete opposite of Kathleen. Therefore, Hester could be considered the unidealized Irish mother *par excellence*. A genuine, unparalleled anti-Mother figure for all Ireland. An anti-heroine, who resists the ingrained interchangeability between the roles of 'mother' and 'woman'. If the idealized figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan obstructs the emergence of realistic and honest narratives about the female experience, ultimately silencing and misrepresenting Irish women, Hester Swane appears as the essential antidote for individual female expression. Hester paves the way for a radically candid and down-to-earth portrayal of womanhood, with her suicide serving as a symbolic halt to the unfortunate idealization of women as unattainable, celestial beings.

Through her suicide, Hester is elevated as an anti-Kathleen icon, a counter-image of Mother Ireland, introduced by Carr to usher in a new era of female agency representation in Irish theatrical history. As Hill argues, "in Carr's [dramaturgy] we see her creation of new *mythopoeias* and 'other possible worlds' which converge on the landscape as a space of female expression" (2019: 19). In *By the Bog of Cats*, one observes the creation of this kind of world, a feminized space, a liminal environment, a bogscape with a sedative maternal touch, amidst the strands of which Hester's corresponding acts of filicide and suicide assume the most radical form of female volition. Both transgressive deeds constitute a dramatic plea for autonomy and self-determination, namely Hester's right to breathe as a woman, Traveller-woman, and Irish woman; the right to breathe as a mother.

In conclusion, it is striking to see how an examination of a contemporary Irish play deeply influenced by Euripides' *Medea* leads to a thought-provoking dialogue with one of Ireland's canonical texts, as is *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. Equally remarkable is how Hester Swane forges a

compelling connection with a foundational figure of the Irish psyche and cultural memory, as is Kathleen; the Mother Ireland personified. To arrive at these findings, I employed the recurring themes of 'Land' and 'Landscape' as two consistent elements that highlighted the predominant Irishness of *By the Bog of Cats*. By employing this method, I systematically revealed the unequivocally Irish aspects within the play. These encompassed a range of elements, from the social position of the Traveller community in Ireland and Seamus Heaney's 'Bog poems' to the symbolism of the Swan in Irish mythology and the oral tradition of *dinnseanchas*. Additionally, I explored the amalgamation of womanhood and motherhood in Irish society, as well as the mystical beliefs surrounding witchcraft. This, in turn, showed that *By the Bog of Cats* consists of a rich tapestry of Irish influences.

As a result of this analysis, it can be safely argued that Carr's play is not just an Irish adaptation of *Medea*. In truth, *By the Bog of Cats* is firmly rooted within the core of the Irish literary tradition.

CONCLUSION

Paulin, Heaney, Carr Revisited: Finding a Common Irish Ground

As we reach the end of this study, some general remarks are in due. So far, each of the three authors has been examined separately, with the same strategy adopted in every chapter. Specifically, in all three chapters, we delved into a detailed analysis of the way in which the selected adaptations relate to their respective Greek tragedy precursors, but, more importantly, what distinct Irish elements they contain. The common thread binding the three chapters together is the simultaneous inquiry regarding the preserved Greekness of the adaptations on the one hand, and their prevalent Irishness on the other. In fact, the whole investigative process could be concretized in one simple question: How *Greek* are the adaptations, but chiefly, how *Irish*?

Exploring the plays by Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney, and Marina Carr, the above consideration was continuously kept in mind, basically serving as the foundational framework for the development of each chapter. In essence, when closely examining the selected adaptations, there were two primary areas of focus. The first involved a scrutiny of the ancient source-texts from which these new plays originate, with direct reference to the tragic texts whenever this seemed necessary or valuable. The second, and larger, area of focus revolved around the identification of any Irish elements that these adaptations might have contained. This led to further explorations of various aspects of Irish history, politics, literature, culture, religion, mythology, and geography.

By situating the chosen adaptations in a broader Irish context, the main aim of this examination was to demonstrate that all the works discussed in this thesis, while undeniably bearing thematic influences from specific Greek tragedies that cannot be overlooked and therefore justify their categorization as adaptations, also exhibit a deep and unmistakable Irish character. That is, all adaptations under inspection, should ultimately come across as distinct Irish plays, firmly grounded in a rich Irish cultural environment and a strong literary tradition. The outcome was to show how the Greek stories of Antigone, Medea, and Philoctetes are brilliantly reimagined to take on an indubitable and multifaceted Irish dimension.

In the process, a broader outlook on the dynamics of Classical reception also emerged. This perspective highlights the potential for a modern work of art that incorporates distinct thematic elements from the Greco-Roman world to develop its own separate identity and become part of the historical and cultural milieu of the society in which it was created. Arguably, all the plays in question can primarily be analyzed from an Irish literary perspective, as they are shown to actively engage with the theatrical annals of Ireland reflecting the prevailing socio-political concerns at the time of their production. This discovery contributes to a profounder understanding of the mechanics of Classical Reception Studies, as this thesis advocates for a more comprehensive interpretative approach to products of Classical reception. Essentially, it was

demonstrated how literary texts with a certain thematic debt to the Classical past are not confined solely within the boundaries of this association in interpretation matters. Rather, as we observed, the Classical influence acts as a driving force, facilitating the integration of those theatrical texts within the fabric of the receiving society and culture. Applying this finding on a wider scale, a holistic CRS approach to Classical reception products must encompass an understanding of how the Greco-Roman element enables, rather than constrains, postclassical artworks to be recontextualized and reimagined in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. In doing so, it enriches the ongoing dialogue between past and present artistic and cultural expressions.

Returning to the specifics of this thesis, balancing one foot on the Greek source and the other on the Irish target does not presuppose that this approach led to identical results in every chapter. Depending on the author and the play, the balance between the two poles varied. For instance, when discussing Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, in order to assess the resemblance that the protagonist of the play, Hester Swane, has to Medea, it was necessary to repeatedly go back to the Euripidean text and gather information about Medea's characterization there. Without first looking at how Medea is portrayed as an outcast, a powerful sorceress, and, eventually, a cold-blooded killer, one would not be able to fully appreciate Hester's outsider status as a Traveller, her alleged proficiency in witchcraft, and, most importantly, her significantly different perspective on filicide compared to Medea's.

In contrast, while examining Paulin's *The Riot Act*, fewer direct references to the Sophoclean text emerged, as Paulin's characterization of Antigone was better rendered intelligible when placed in a wider Irish context and in juxtaposition with Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, a real-life impersonation of the Greek heroine. Accordingly, one was required to look outside the theatrical text and inspect Devlin's background story as well as the history of political instability in Northern Ireland, to be in a position to appreciate fully Paulin's depiction of his heroine. The same holds true for Paulin's overall motivation behind composing *The Riot Act*, which cannot be separated from Conor Cruise O'Brien's (mis)interpretation of *Antigone*. Evidently, in the case of Paulin, it proved more insightful to concentrate on the extratextual evidence of how Antigone's story resonated with him rather than to seek this connection within the ancient text.

Finally, in Heaney's case, things were slightly more complex. Considering Heaney's deep association with Classical antiquity, and especially the Greek world, some preliminary discussion about this relationship, particularly as it manifests itself in Heaney's poetry, was deemed necessary. Moving then on to the analysis of *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, the balance between ancient source-text and Irish component was addressed. For instance, an examination of the main themes of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* was included in the analysis of *The Cure at Troy*, to show how Heaney uses the antithetical pairs of 'alienation vs. communication', 'end vs. means', and 'cure vs. wound' to effectively address the Troubles, and also envision a way out of the stalemate.

Likewise, in *The Burial at Thebes*, it was essential to first explore how the prohibition of burial is depicted in the Sophoclean tragedy before conducting a comprehensive analysis of the elaborate burial and funeral practices in Ireland. To this, a personal experience of contested burial comparable to that of Polyneices was taken into account, namely the death of the Irish hunger striker Francis Hughes, whose family Heaney knew personally. Eventually, this approach helped to explain why Polyneices' unburied status struck such a chord with the Irish, and why Sophocles' *Antigone* is a play that arguably 'belongs to Ireland'.

Having dealt with each playwright individually, it is now worth evaluating them collectively. The first observation to be made is that the degree of fidelity to the source-text in a given adaptation does not necessarily determine the extent and success of the ensuing Irishization process. Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* stands out as the play with the most significant deviations from the original tragedy. The backdrop, a Midlands bog, instantly establishes the play's connection to Ireland, while obscuring the play's affiliation to *Medea*. On the other hand, Heaney's adaptations of *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* are evidently the ones that remain more faithful to the setting and plot of the ancient plays. There are no changes in the names of the protagonists, nor a translocation of scenery. Still, in both adaptations Heaney manages to convey a distinct Irish feeling, perhaps only a little more nuanced than in Carr. Infusing the dialogues of his plays with undeniable Irish markers, Heaney adeptly Irishizes his adaptations without having to change much else. To an audience with the right sensibilities, the vocabulary of the Troubles as articulated in *The Cure at Troy*, or the cadence of the traditional Irish lament songs enunciated in *The Burial at Thebes*, cannot go unnoticed. The same applies to Paulin, who, in *The Riot Act*, also relies heavily on language, using a distinctive Hiberno-English idiom. This linguistic choice creates the impression that the action of *The Riot Act* unfolds in Northern Ireland and not in Thebes, as is assumed. Overall, there are different techniques and methods at the playwright's disposal to render their adaptations as authentically Irish. Some of these approaches are more overt, while others may be more understated, yet they all succeed in conveying the sense that the respective plays truly represent Ireland.

Another point to consider is that the various Irish themes present in each adaptation are not mutually exclusive, but, in reality, there exists a certain correspondence or interconnection between them. For instance, both Heaney and Paulin touch on the Troubles, albeit in a different manner. Paulin seeks to establish clear-cut connections between the characters of *The Riot Act* and the actual perpetrators of the sectarian division, while Heaney, in *The Cure at Troy*, focuses on the incessant violence and culture of fear that this period brought to Northern Ireland as a whole. Paulin is categorical in his tone, using the figure of Creon to blame those he holds responsible for the ongoing deadlock in his country, while Heaney appears at once more visionary and pragmatic, looking for possible outlets by assigning a symbolic significance to the intended healing of

Philoctetes' wound. Finally, Paulin sympathizes squarely with the Republican position, whereas Heaney transcends the existing polarities rampant in the North, focusing exclusively on spreading a hopeful message about the importance of mutual cooperation and the prevalence of peace.

To provide another example of the established thematic correspondences between the examined authors, both Carr and Heaney seem to allude in their plays to certain customs and traditions that are uniquely Irish. In *By the Bog of Cats* we saw how the ancient Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas* – the lore of places – points to Hester's primordial connection with the Midlands bogland. The implications of Hester's profound knowledge of her motherland, a heritage that runs the danger of being extinct or forgotten because of the schemes of the bog's settled community, become clearer when contrasted with this special body of texts commemorating the myths, legends, and local histories associated with the Irish landscape and its settlements. Bringing forth *dinnseanchas* as a notional referent, Hester is simultaneously depicted as the possessor and safeguard of an intangible cultural inheritance surrounding the Bog of Cats, explaining the radical way she understands ownership and belonging within the bog's territories. Comparably, in *The Burial at Thebes*, we observed how with the Irish term *dúchas*, which connotes a set of values shared within one's community and among kin, one could effectively explain the Irish inclination to sympathize with Antigone. Embracing *dúchas* as the proper code of conduct, Heaney's Antigone defies Creon's edict to bury Polyneices, asserting that her actions are driven by a different set of beliefs that prioritize familial bonds over the laws of the city.

Another common theme shared this time between Carr and Paulin that resolutely situates their adaptations within an Irish context is the incorporation of elements from Irish mythology. In *By the Bog of Cats*, we examined in detail the swan's symbolism, looking at the various ways in which it manifests itself in Irish mythology and folklore. From the tale of Aengus and Diarmuid's swan curse to the swan stories found in the Children of Lir saga, it becomes clear that the swan is an animal that holds enormous symbolic value in the Irish mind, representing the soul of man. After considering these mythic narratives, Carr's choice to employ Black Wing, the dead black swan, as Hester's alter ego becomes comprehensible in its full complexity. This way, Hester Swane becomes another mythical figure to contribute to the extensive Irish swan iconography. Another mythic element included in *By the Bog of Cats* is *Tír na nÓg*, the Celtic Otherworld, a place of eternal bliss and abundance. The foregrounding of this mythical location as Hester's and Josie's final destination makes Hester's killing of Josie more palatable. Thereby, Irish mythology serves as a vehicle to substantiate and legitimize the various transgressive acts shown by the playwrights in their adaptations. Now, in *The Riot Act*, Paulin does not rely on allusions to ancient Irish mythology to justify his heroes, but instead draws upon a reservoir of contemporary mythologizing. Specifically, by incorporating the Irish mythic rite of blood-sacrifice, which resonates with the early 20th-century Irish Rebels and the Republican hunger strikes of 1981, and

by placing Antigone within this genealogy of sacrificial martyrdom, Paulin bestows his heroine with the moral high ground in her conflict with Creon. Again, we see how the embedment of mythical underpinnings, whether they are contemporary or ancient, not only serves as a tool to explain certain bold decisions taken by the protagonists of the plays, but also imbues these episodes with an unassailable Irish essence.

To move now to another feature that is notably shared by all three playwrights. This is the presence of W. B. Yeats in the background of every adaptation. Yeats stands out as a major fountainhead of contemporary Irish literature, with his poetry, playwriting, and philosophical ideas permeating all the works under examination. This occurs either directly, with the playwright overtly establishing a connection between their play and Yeats, or more subtly, requiring the attentive reader to identify such a connection. For instance, in *By the Bog of Cats*, Yeats's poem 'Leda and the Swan' serves to underscore the Hiberno-Greek overtones of the swan imagery, upon which Carr builds her characterization of Hester. We also saw how the symbol of the swan is central to the Yeatsian epistemology elaborated in his treatise *A Vision*. Furthermore, it was proposed that Hester's suicide using a fishing-knife bears similarities to a corresponding scene found in Yeats's play *Purgatory*. More importantly, the chapter on Carr concludes with a comparison between Hester Swane and Kathleen ni Houlihan, the protagonist of the eponymous play by Yeats. As it was argued, Hester challenges Kathleen's role as an icon of Irish womanhood, signalling the beginning of a new era in the representation of female agency within the annals of Irish theatre.

In the chapter on Heaney, we examined how Yeats's unsuccessful attempt to stage *Antigone* troubled Heaney before he took on the task of adapting the Sophoclean play to commemorate the centenary of the Abbey Theatre; Ireland's national theatre, founded by Yeats himself. In a way, *The Burial at Thebes* fulfils Yeats's long-standing wish to see a version of *Antigone* performed on the Abbey stage. Also, with regard to Heaney's adaptation of *Philoctetes*, we noticed how the introductory chorus of *The Cure at Troy* uses the simile of 'polished stones', which is inspired by Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916'. Employing this Yeatsian imagery, Heaney offers a critique of the ineffectiveness of both republican and loyalist factions, as both sides are trapped in their current woeful condition, incapable of looking beyond their individual concerns. In *The Cure at Troy*, we also saw how Yeats's poem 'On Being Asked for a War Poem' is echoed in Heaney's conclusive chorus. Ultimately, Heaney aligns with Yeats's perspective that, even though suffering cannot be avoided, it should serve as a central focus for poetic contemplation.

Finally, in the chapter on Paulin, Yeats's renowned poem 'Easter, 1916' resurfaced as a topic of examination. Paulin borrows a well-known line from Yeats's poem – the one denoting how the poet's opinion of the Easter Rising conspirators changed utterly – to underscore the profound shift in Creon's belief system, and his eventual alignment with Antigone in the finale of *The Riot*

Act. In fact, also Antigone's characterization in the play is influenced by the same poem. Antigone is repeatedly described as 'wild', a word with unique significance in Ireland, as also Yeats himself used it to commend the Irish rebels. Discovering that the same word is used by Yeats in another of his poems titled 'On a Political Prisoner', where it describes the Irish female revolutionary Constance Gore-Booth, one cannot ignore the implication of this epithet in shaping Antigone's portrayal in *The Riot Act*. By deliberately alluding to Yeats, Paulin aims to place Antigone's sacrifice alongside the sacrifice of the Irish rebels, thereby affording Antigone a place within the enduring tradition of sacrificial martyrdom in the struggle for Irish independence.

Yeats's pervasive influence in all plays gives rise to further considerations that eventually transcend the scope of the Irish poet himself. Surely, the Yeatsian resonance is striking and thus warrants placement and discussion within a broader context. The entire matter boils down to one question: why do all Irish playwrights, when adapting Greek tragedy, end up referring to Yeats? The logical answer to this stems from the overall stature of Yeats. Today, Yeats is celebrated as the leading figure behind the Irish Literary Revival, namely the late 19th and early 20th century cultural and literary movement devoted to revitalizing and championing Irish literature and traditions. As a direct outcome of this, Yeats is widely acknowledged as the Irish author who made the most significant contributions to exploring and articulating a contemporary national identity, making him virtually synonymous with Irish literature. In other words, Yeats serves nowadays as a *topos* or common ground for Irish writing. This, in turn, implies that when an author refers to a poem or play by Yeats, in the way we have seen in the adaptations analyzed, it often carries a more extensive underlying purpose than the reference alone. Deep down, alluding to Yeats is a secure method for an author to reinforce their text with Irish meaning. Applying this idea to this specific thesis, all discussed adaptors seek to accentuate the predominant Irishness of their versions of Greek tragedy, with Yeats serving as a decisive catalyst in this undertaking. Apart from being Ireland's preeminent literary figure, Yeats consistently emerges as a touchstone for the exploration of Irish themes in successive generations of writers.

After identifying Yeats as the common denominator in the plays of Paulin, Heaney, and Carr, some concluding remarks need to be made about the collective endeavour of these three playwrights in crafting plays inspired by the narratives of Greek tragedy for the Irish public. While they appear to hail from different geographical, ideological, and political backgrounds in relation to the still existing complexities surrounding the island of Ireland – Carr, a Southern Irish writer from the Republic; Heaney, a Northerner composing his first play about the Troubles in the North and his second for a festive occasion in the Republic with his gaze set on foreign affairs; and Paulin, another Northerner focusing solely on the events in the North – all three playwrights are clearly rooted in a shared cultural foundation. As this thesis attempted to point out, by employing Greek tragedy as a means of communication, these prominent authors collectively navigate the

boundaries of a common Irish heritage, especially a complex but unbroken Irish cultural identity. All examined plays attest to this, as they invariably exhibit the struggle from the adaptor's side to delineate a particular Irish terrain and harmonize the multifaceted dimensions of the Irish experience, ultimately serving as a testament to the enduring power of Greek tragedy as a vehicle for disclosing and assessing the complexities of Ireland's cultural and historical tapestry. In doing so, Paulin, Heaney, and Carr collectively contribute to a rich and multi-layered narrative that reflects the enduring spirit and resilience of the Irish people across different geographical, ideological, and political contexts.

Marked by border divisions, marred by civil conflicts and acts of terrorism, characterized by a legacy of colonial rule and exploitation, and shaped by the passionate struggles between opposing religious groups, the history of Ireland is intricate and subject to many interpretations. Naturally, Paulin, Heaney, and Carr do not address the same facets of the Irish question, and they may not always align in their assumptions or perspectives. Indisputably though, these are three playwrights, who – by invoking Dionysus to Erin – contribute to a shared narrative of what it means to be Irish in this world. In other words, they attempt, and do find, a common Irish ground.

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Summary in Dutch

When Dionysus Lands on Erin onderzoekt hoe de Ierse toneelschrijvers Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney en Marina Carr zich hebben beziggehouden met de receptie van de Griekse tragedie, door bewerkingen te produceren die, hoewel geworteld in hun klassieke oorsprongen, resulteren in duidelijk Ierse toneelstukken die zijn ingebed in de culturele en literaire tradities van Ierland, en die de historische en politieke omstandigheden van het land weerspiegelen.

De receptie van het oude Griekse drama vormt een dominante invloed op het hedendaagse Ierse theatermaken. Vanaf de 20e eeuw hebben de Ieren zich tot de Griekse tragedie gewend om hun eigen tragedies uit te drukken. Door bewerkingen op te voeren van de gewelddadige en conflictrijke verhalen van Aeschylus, Sophocles en Euripides, hebben enkele van de meest gerenommeerde toneelschrijvers van Ierland een reeks dringende kwesties aangekaart die de Ierse verbeelding hebben geboeid. The Troubles, het koloniale verleden van Ierland, grensverdeling, etnisch-religieuze strijd, het mythische erfgoed van het land, de uitdagingen van de moderniteit, genderkwesties en vragen over de erfenis van de taal worden allemaal onderzocht via de Ierse betrokkenheid bij de Griekse tragedie. In tijden van crisis en onzekerheid roepen de Ieren Dionysus naar hun onrustige en betwiste land.

Het proefschrift wil dit fenomeen laten zien door zich specifiek te richten op drie auteurs en de versies van de Griekse tragedie die zij voor het Ierse toneel schreven. De bewerkingen die worden onderzocht zijn Tom Paulins *The Riot Act* (1984), gebaseerd op Sophocles' *Antigone*, Seamus Heaneys *The Cure at Troy* (1990) en *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), gebaseerd op respectievelijk Sophocles' *Philoctetes* en *Antigone*, en Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), gebaseerd op Euripides' *Medea*. Door de tragedies over *Antigone*, *Philoctetes* en *Medea* te lenen en te herwerken, dragen deze toneelschrijvers bij aan een gedeelde verkenning van de Ierse identiteit.

Het proefschrift betoogt dat hoewel de resulterende bewerkingen verschillende aspecten van de Ierse ervaring aanpakken, ze samen een meeslepend verhaal creëren dat verschillende perspectieven en discoursen verenigt onder een gemeenschappelijk Iers ethos. Hoewel de gekozen auteurs verschillende geografische, ideologische en politieke achtergronden hebben die zijn gevormd door de complexe dynamiek van Ierland, onderzoekt dit boek hoe hun bewerkingen zijn gegrondvest in een gemeenschappelijke culturele basis. Kortom, we zullen zien hoe deze toneelschrijvers, door Griekse tragedie als communicatiemiddel te gebruiken, een gemeenschappelijke Ierse basis proberen te vinden en vinden.

When Dionysus Lands on Erin is een interdisciplinair werk dat de dubbele opleiding van de auteur in Klassieken en Literatuurwetenschap weerspiegelt. Lezers worden uitgenodigd om zich te verdiepen in oude teksten, verrijkt door inzichtelijke analyses van hun Ierse bewerkingen. Deze aanpak overbrugt niet alleen de bron- en ontvangende culturen, maar verheldert ook de dynamiek van de klassieke receptie, en onthult hoe klassieke verhalen kunnen worden geïntegreerd in de nationale literatuur van een land. Door de analyse van de geselecteerde bewerkingen laat het boek zien hoe de transgressieve mythen van Antigones verzet, Medeas filicide en Philoctetes' wond tot leven komen in de geschiedenis van Ierland, wat benadrukt dat de klassieke oudheid vandaag de dag nog steeds zeer relevant is.

Door hun unieke kijk op de Griekse tragedie weven Paulin, Heaney en Carr een gedeeld verhaal dat de evoluerende essentie van de hedendaagse Ierse identiteit aan het begin van de 20e en 21e eeuw vastlegt. Terwijl elke toneelschrijver verschillende aspecten van de Ierse ervaring onderzoekt, onthullen ze samen de ingewikkelde complexiteit van het culturele en historische tapijt van Ierland. Lezers worden aangemoedigd om te zien hoe deze auteurs het Ierse zelfgevoel belichten in een tijd van snelle verandering en hoe de Ieren, door de Griekse tragedie tot de hunne te maken, dichter bij het begrijpen van zichzelf komen.

Curriculum Vitae

Dimitrios Kentrotis Zinelis was born on 24 May 1991 in Athens, Greece. He completed his schooling at the Moraitis School, earning his I.B. Diploma with distinction in 2009. From 2009 to 2012, he pursued a BA in Classics at Durham University, with his thesis focusing on the Myth of Er, the concluding section of Plato's *Republic*. Between 2013 and 2016, he completed a Research Master's (ResMA) in Literary Studies at Leiden University, graduating *cum laude*. His thesis explored Irish adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Medea*. In 2018, he began his PhD as an external candidate at Leiden University, focusing on the reception of Greek tragedy in Ireland. He has presented his research at various international conferences and has published his work in collected volumes and academic journals. Additionally, he served as the editor-in-chief of *LGJ* (*LUCAS Graduate Journal*), overseeing the publication of its tenth issue.

Dimitrios Kentrotis Zinelis werd geboren op 24 mei 1991 in Athene, Griekenland. Hij voltooide zijn middelbare school aan de Moraitis School, waar hij in 2009 met onderscheiding zijn I.B.-diploma behaalde. Van 2009 tot 2012 studeerde hij Klassieke Talen aan Durham University, waarbij zijn scriptie zich richtte op de Mythe van Er, het slotgedeelte van Plato's *Republiek*. Tussen 2013 en 2016 voltooide hij een Research Master (ResMA) in Literatuurwetenschap aan de Universiteit Leiden, waar hij *cum laude* afstudeerde. Zijn scriptie onderzocht Ierse bewerkingen van Sophocles' *Antigone* en Euripides' *Medea*. In 2018 begon hij zijn promotieonderzoek als externe kandidaat aan de Universiteit Leiden, gericht op de receptie van de Griekse tragedie in Ierland. Hij heeft zijn onderzoek gepresenteerd op verschillende internationale conferenties en zijn werk gepubliceerd in bundels en academische tijdschriften. Daarnaast was hij hoofdredacteur van *LGJ* (*LUCAS Graduate Journal*) en verantwoordelijk voor de publicatie van het tiende nummer.