When Dionysus lands on Erin: Greek tragedy on Irish grounds

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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:
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> > *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.
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> 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.