When Dionysus lands on Erin: Greek tragedy on Irish grounds

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Paulin, Heaney, Carr Revisited: Finding a Common Irish Ground

As we reach the end of this study, some general remarks are in due. So far, each of the three authors has been examined separately, with the same strategy adopted in every chapter. Specifically, in all three chapters, we delved into a detailed analysis of the way in which the selected adaptations relate to their respective Greek tragedy precursors, but, more importantly, what distinct Irish elements they contain. The common thread binding the three chapters together is the simultaneous inquiry regarding the preserved Greekness of the adaptations on the one hand, and their prevalent Irishness on the other. In fact, the whole investigative process could be concretized in one simple question: How *Greek* are the adaptations, but chiefly, how *Irish*?

Exploring the plays by Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney, and Marina Carr, the above consideration was continuously kept in mind, basically serving as the foundational framework for the development of each chapter. In essence, when closely examining the selected adaptations, there were two primary areas of focus. The first involved a scrutiny of the ancient source-texts from which these new plays originate, with direct reference to the tragic texts whenever this seemed necessary or valuable. The second, and larger, area of focus revolved around the identification of any Irish elements that these adaptations might have contained. This led to further explorations of various aspects of Irish history, politics, literature, culture, religion, mythology, and geography.

By situating the chosen adaptations in a broader Irish context, the main aim of this examination was to demonstrate that all the works discussed in this thesis, while undeniably bearing thematic influences from specific Greek tragedies that cannot be overlooked and therefore justify their categorization as adaptations, also exhibit a deep and unmistakable Irish character. That is, all adaptations under inspection, should ultimately come across as distinct Irish plays, firmly grounded in a rich Irish cultural environment and a strong literary tradition. The outcome was to show how the Greek stories of Antigone, Medea, and Philoctetes are brilliantly reimagined to take on an indubitable and multifaceted Irish dimension.

In the process, a broader outlook on the dynamics of Classical reception also emerged. This perspective highlights the potential for a modern work of art that incorporates distinct thematic elements from the Greco-Roman world to develop its own separate identity and become part of the historical and cultural milieu of the society in which it was created. Arguably, all the plays in question can primarily be analyzed from an Irish literary perspective, as they are shown to actively engage with the theatrical annals of Ireland reflecting the prevailing socio-political concerns at the time of their production. This discovery contributes to a profounder understanding of the mechanics of Classical Reception Studies, as this thesis advocates for a more comprehensive interpretative approach to products of Classical reception. Essentially, it was

demonstrated how literary texts with a certain thematic debt to the Classical past are not confined solely within the boundaries of this association in interpretation matters. Rather, as we observed, the Classical influence acts as a driving force, facilitating the integration of those theatrical texts within the fabric of the receiving society and culture. Applying this finding on a wider scale, a holistic CRS approach to Classical reception products must encompass an understanding of how the Greco-Roman element enables, rather than constrains, postclassical artworks to be recontextualized and reimagined in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. In doing so, it enriches the ongoing dialogue between past and present artistic and cultural expressions.

Returning to the specifics of this thesis, balancing one foot on the Greek source and the other on the Irish target does not presuppose that this approach led to identical results in every chapter. Depending on the author and the play, the balance between the two poles varied. For instance, when discussing Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, in order to assess the resemblance that the protagonist of the play, Hester Swane, has to Medea, it was necessary to repeatedly go back to the Euripidean text and gather information about Medea's characterization there. Without first looking at how Medea is portrayed as an outcast, a powerful sorceress, and, eventually, a cold-blooded killer, one would not be able to fully appreciate Hester's outsider status as a Traveller, her alleged proficiency in witchcraft, and, most importantly, her significantly different perspective on filicide compared to Medea's.

In contrast, while examining Paulin's *The Riot Act*, fewer direct references to the Sophoclean text emerged, as Paulin's characterization of Antigone was better rendered intelligible when placed in a wider Irish context and in juxtaposition with Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, a real-life impersonation of the Greek heroine. Accordingly, one was required to look outside the theatrical text and inspect Devlin's background story as well as the history of political instability in Northern Ireland, to be in a position to appreciate fully Paulin's depiction of his heroine. The same holds true for Paulin's overall motivation behind composing *The Riot Act*, which cannot be separated from Conor Cruise O'Brien's (mis)interpretation of *Antigone*. Evidently, in the case of Paulin, it proved more insightful to concentrate on the extratextual evidence of how Antigone's story resonated with him rather than to seek this connection within the ancient text.

Finally, in Heaney's case, things were slightly more complex. Considering Heaney's deep association with Classical antiquity, and especially the Greek world, some preliminary discussion about this relationship, particularly as it manifests itself in Heaney's poetry, was deemed necessary. Moving then on to the analysis of *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*, the balance between ancient source-text and Irish component was addressed. For instance, an examination of the main themes of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* was included in the analysis of *The Cure at Troy*, to show how Heaney uses the antithetical pairs of 'alienation vs. communication', 'end vs. means', and 'cure vs. wound' to effectively address the Troubles, and also envision a way out of the stalemate.

Likewise, in *The Burial at Thebes*, it was essential to first explore how the prohibition of burial is depicted in the Sophoclean tragedy before conducting a comprehensive analysis of the elaborate burial and funeral practices in Ireland. To this, a personal experience of contested burial comparable to that of Polyneices was taken into account, namely the death of the Irish hunger striker Francis Hughes, whose family Heaney knew personally. Eventually, this approach helped to explain why Polyneices' unburied status struck such a chord with the Irish, and why Sophocles' *Antigone* is a play that arguably 'belongs to Ireland'.

Having dealt with each playwright individually, it is now worth evaluating them collectively. The first observation to be made is that the degree of fidelity to the source-text in a given adaptation does not necessarily determine the extent and success of the ensuing Irishization process. Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* stands out as the play with the most significant deviations from the original tragedy. The backdrop, a Midlands bog, instantly establishes the play's connection to Ireland, while obscuring the play's affiliation to *Medea*. On the other hand, Heaney's adaptations of *Philoctetes* and *Antigone* are evidently the ones that remain more faithful to the setting and plot of the ancient plays. There are no changes in the names of the protagonists, nor a translocation of scenery. Still, in both adaptations Heaney manages to convey a distinct Irish feeling, perhaps only a little more nuanced than in Carr. Infusing the dialogues of his plays with undeniable Irish markers, Heaney adeptly Irishizes his adaptations without having to change much else. To an audience with the right sensibilities, the vocabulary of the Troubles as articulated in *The Cure at Troy*, or the cadence of the traditional Irish lament songs enunciated in *The Burial at Thebes*, cannot go unnoticed. The same applies to Paulin, who, in *The Riot Act*, also relies heavily on language, using a distinctive Hiberno-English idiom. This linguistic choice creates the impression that the action of *The Riot Act* unfolds in Northern Ireland and not in Thebes, as is assumed. Overall, there are different techniques and methods at the playwright's disposal to render their adaptations as authentically Irish. Some of these approaches are more overt, while others may be more understated, yet they all succeed in conveying the sense that the respective plays truly represent Ireland.

Another point to consider is that the various Irish themes present in each adaptation are not mutually exclusive, but, in reality, there exists a certain correspondence or interconnection between them. For instance, both Heaney and Paulin touch on the Troubles, albeit in a different manner. Paulin seeks to establish clear-cut connections between the characters of *The Riot Act* and the actual perpetrators of the sectarian division, while Heaney, in *The Cure at Troy*, focuses on the incessant violence and culture of fear that this period brought to Northern Ireland as a whole. Paulin is categorical in his tone, using the figure of Creon to blame those he holds responsible for the ongoing deadlock in his country, while Heaney appears at once more visionary and pragmatic, looking for possible outlets by assigning a symbolic significance to the intended healing of

Philoctetes' wound. Finally, Paulin sympathizes squarely with the Republican position, whereas Heaney transcends the existing polarities rampant in the North, focusing exclusively on spreading a hopeful message about the importance of mutual cooperation and the prevalence of peace.

To provide another example of the established thematic correspondences between the examined authors, both Carr and Heaney seem to allude in their plays to certain customs and traditions that are uniquely Irish. In *By the Bog of Cats* we saw how the ancient Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas* – the lore of places – points to Hester's primordial connection with the Midlands bogland. The implications of Hester's profound knowledge of her motherland, a heritage that runs the danger of being extinct or forgotten because of the schemes of the bog's settled community, become clearer when contrasted with this special body of texts commemorating the myths, legends, and local histories associated with the Irish landscape and its settlements. Bringing forth *dinnseanchas* as a notional referent, Hester is simultaneously depicted as the possessor and safeguard of an intangible cultural inheritance surrounding the Bog of Cats, explaining the radical way she understands ownership and belonging within the bog's territories. Comparably, in *The Burial at Thebes*, we observed how with the Irish term *dúchas*, which connotes a set of values shared within one's community and among kin, one could effectively explain the Irish inclination to sympathize with Antigone. Embracing *dúchas* as the proper code of conduct, Heaney's Antigone defies Creon's edict to bury Polyneices, asserting that her actions are driven by a different set of beliefs that prioritize familial bonds over the laws of the city.

Another common theme shared this time between Carr and Paulin that resolutely situates their adaptations within an Irish context is the incorporation of elements from Irish mythology. In *By the Bog of Cats*, we examined in detail the swan's symbolism, looking at the various ways in which it manifests itself in Irish mythology and folklore. From the tale of Aengus and Diarmuid's swan curse to the swan stories found in the Children of Lir saga, it becomes clear that the swan is an animal that holds enormous symbolic value in the Irish mind, representing the soul of man. After considering these mythic narratives, Carr's choice to employ Black Wing, the dead black swan, as Hester's alter ego becomes comprehensible in its full complexity. This way, Hester Swane becomes another mythical figure to contribute to the extensive Irish swan iconography. Another mythic element included in *By the Bog of Cats* is *Tír na nÓg*, the Celtic Otherworld, a place of eternal bliss and abundance. The foregrounding of this mythical location as Hester's and Josie's final destination makes Hester's killing of Josie more palatable. Thereby, Irish mythology serves as a vehicle to substantiate and legitimize the various transgressive acts shown by the playwrights in their adaptations. Now, in *The Riot Act*, Paulin does not rely on allusions to ancient Irish mythology to justify his heroes, but instead draws upon a reservoir of contemporary mythologizing. Specifically, by incorporating the Irish mythic rite of blood-sacrifice, which resonates with the early 20th-century Irish Rebels and the Republican hunger strikes of 1981, and

by placing Antigone within this genealogy of sacrificial martyrdom, Paulin bestows his heroine with the moral high ground in her conflict with Creon. Again, we see how the embedment of mythical underpinnings, whether they are contemporary or ancient, not only serves as a tool to explain certain bold decisions taken by the protagonists of the plays, but also imbues these episodes with an unassailable Irish essence.

To move now to another feature that is notably shared by all three playwrights. This is the presence of W. B. Yeats in the background of every adaptation. Yeats stands out as a major fountainhead of contemporary Irish literature, with his poetry, playwriting, and philosophical ideas permeating all the works under examination. This occurs either directly, with the playwright overtly establishing a connection between their play and Yeats, or more subtly, requiring the attentive reader to identify such a connection. For instance, in *By the Bog of Cats*, Yeats's poem 'Leda and the Swan' serves to underscore the Hiberno-Greek overtones of the swan imagery, upon which Carr builds her characterization of Hester. We also saw how the symbol of the swan is central to the Yeatsian epistemology elaborated in his treatise *A Vision*. Furthermore, it was proposed that Hester's suicide using a fishing-knife bears similarities to a corresponding scene found in Yeats's play *Purgatory*. More importantly, the chapter on Carr concludes with a comparison between Hester Swane and Kathleen ni Houlihan, the protagonist of the eponymous play by Yeats. As it was argued, Hester challenges Kathleen's role as an icon of Irish womanhood, signalling the beginning of a new era in the representation of female agency within the annals of Irish theatre.

In the chapter on Heaney, we examined how Yeats's unsuccessful attempt to stage *Antigone* troubled Heaney before he took on the task of adapting the Sophoclean play to commemorate the centenary of the Abbey Theatre; Ireland's national theatre, founded by Yeats himself. In a way, *The Burial at Thebes* fulfils Yeats's long-standing wish to see a version of *Antigone* performed on the Abbey stage. Also, with regard to Heaney's adaptation of *Philoctetes*, we noticed how the introductory chorus of *The Cure at Troy* uses the simile of 'polished stones', which is inspired by Yeats's poem 'Easter, 1916'. Employing this Yeatsian imagery, Heaney offers a critique of the ineffectiveness of both republican and loyalist factions, as both sides are trapped in their current woeful condition, incapable of looking beyond their individual concerns. In *The Cure at Troy*, we also saw how Yeats's poem 'On Being Asked for a War Poem' is echoed in Heaney's conclusive chorus. Ultimately, Heaney aligns with Yeats's perspective that, even though suffering cannot be avoided, it should serve as a central focus for poetic contemplation.

Finally, in the chapter on Paulin, Yeats's renowned poem 'Easter, 1916' resurfaced as a topic of examination. Paulin borrows a well-known line from Yeats's poem – the one denoting how the poet's opinion of the Easter Rising conspirators changed utterly – to underscore the profound shift in Creon's belief system, and his eventual alignment with Antigone in the finale of *The Riot*

Act. In fact, also Antigone's characterization in the play is influenced by the same poem. Antigone is repeatedly described as 'wild', a word with unique significance in Ireland, as also Yeats himself used it to commend the Irish rebels. Discovering that the same word is used by Yeats in another of his poems titled 'On a Political Prisoner', where it describes the Irish female revolutionary Constance Gore-Booth, one cannot ignore the implication of this epithet in shaping Antigone's portrayal in *The Riot Act*. By deliberately alluding to Yeats, Paulin aims to place Antigone's sacrifice alongside the sacrifice of the Irish rebels, thereby affording Antigone a place within the enduring tradition of sacrificial martyrdom in the struggle for Irish independence.

Yeats's pervasive influence in all plays gives rise to further considerations that eventually transcend the scope of the Irish poet himself. Surely, the Yeatsian resonance is striking and thus warrants placement and discussion within a broader context. The entire matter boils down to one question: why do all Irish playwrights, when adapting Greek tragedy, end up referring to Yeats? The logical answer to this stems from the overall stature of Yeats. Today, Yeats is celebrated as the leading figure behind the Irish Literary Revival, namely the late 19th and early 20th century cultural and literary movement devoted to revitalizing and championing Irish literature and traditions. As a direct outcome of this, Yeats is widely acknowledged as the Irish author who made the most significant contributions to exploring and articulating a contemporary national identity, making him virtually synonymous with Irish literature. In other words, Yeats serves nowadays as a *topos* or common ground for Irish writing. This, in turn, implies that when an author refers to a poem or play by Yeats, in the way we have seen in the adaptations analyzed, it often carries a more extensive underlying purpose than the reference alone. Deep down, alluding to Yeats is a secure method for an author to reinforce their text with Irish meaning. Applying this idea to this specific thesis, all discussed adaptors seek to accentuate the predominant Irishness of their versions of Greek tragedy, with Yeats serving as a decisive catalyst in this undertaking. Apart from being Ireland's preeminent literary figure, Yeats consistently emerges as a touchstone for the exploration of Irish themes in successive generations of writers.

After identifying Yeats as the common denominator in the plays of Paulin, Heaney, and Carr, some concluding remarks need to be made about the collective endeavour of these three playwrights in crafting plays inspired by the narratives of Greek tragedy for the Irish public. While they appear to hail from different geographical, ideological, and political backgrounds in relation to the still existing complexities surrounding the island of Ireland – Carr, a Southern Irish writer from the Republic; Heaney, a Northerner composing his first play about the Troubles in the North and his second for a festive occasion in the Republic with his gaze set on foreign affairs; and Paulin, another Northerner focusing solely on the events in the North – all three playwrights are clearly rooted in a shared cultural foundation. As this thesis attempted to point out, by employing Greek tragedy as a means of communication, these prominent authors collectively navigate the

boundaries of a common Irish heritage, especially a complex but unbroken Irish cultural identity. All examined plays attest to this, as they invariably exhibit the struggle from the adaptor's side to delineate a particular Irish terrain and harmonize the multifaceted dimensions of the Irish experience, ultimately serving as a testament to the enduring power of Greek tragedy as a vehicle for disclosing and assessing the complexities of Ireland's cultural and historical tapestry. In doing so, Paulin, Heaney, and Carr collectively contribute to a rich and multi-layered narrative that reflects the enduring spirit and resilience of the Irish people across different geographical, ideological, and political contexts.

Marked by border divisions, marred by civil conflicts and acts of terrorism, characterized by a legacy of colonial rule and exploitation, and shaped by the passionate struggles between opposing religious groups, the history of Ireland is intricate and subject to many interpretations. Naturally, Paulin, Heaney, and Carr do not address the same facets of the Irish question, and they may not always align in their assumptions or perspectives. Indisputably though, these are three playwrights, who – by invoking Dionysus to Erin – contribute to a shared narrative of what it means to be Irish in this world. In other words, they attempt, and do find, a common Irish ground.