

From Troy to the Bog: Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the Irish Page

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Summary of the Dissertation

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In contemporary Ireland, the grievances at the core of Greek tragedy, disputed justice, community division, and the scars of civil war, are neither foreign nor distant from the ancient stage. Rather, the realities of Ireland after partition and the Troubles are very much a part of Ireland's cultural imagination. Over a century or more, however, Irish writers have not been drawn to Greek tragedies as stale readings of the classics, but as living constructs for the dramatization of the unhealed disagreements, moral crimes, and historical wounds which shape life in post-partition Ireland and beyond the Troubles. This relationship is hardly coincidental. Marianne McDonald argues in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light* (1992), Greek tragedy has always been a theater of the dispossessed, giving voice to the defeated, the exiled, and the marginalized (12).¹ In Ireland, Greek tragedies are used by playwrights to give language to a range of issues around authority, violence, memory and political responsibility with which they grapple. To understand the relationships between Irish theater and Greek tragedy, we must evaluate how these historical traumas have profoundly shaped contemporary Irish cultural consciousness.

Despite the richness of existing scholarships, significant gaps remain. It would be expected that studies on Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy would be related to either Heaney or Carr, but not both. This dissertation addresses this gap by providing a comparison of Heaney's Sophoclean versions and Carr's Euripidean appropriations, and showing how their different approaches to adaptation result in different political and ethical consequences.

There has been a lot of scholarship focusing on the thematic similarities between Greek and Irish tragedy, and the process of adaptation and appropriation is often overlooked. This dissertation distinguishes between version (Heaney's mode: a mode that retains Sophoclean form with interpretative inflections) and appropriation (Carr's mode: a mode that dislocates setting, characterization, and ideology). By theorizing these two modes and demonstrating their different political work, this dissertation develops a conceptual framework for understanding Irish receptions of Greek tragedy.

Existing scholarship tends to treat Irish receptions of Greek tragedy as either continuous (the continuity thesis) or as isolated individual achievements. This dissertation proposes an alternative model: *punctuated redeployments*. Irish interest in Greek tragedy clusters around moments of

¹ Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

political crisis and cultural transformation, the Literary Revival, the Troubles, the peace process, the Celtic Tiger, rather than forming an unbroken tradition. This model accounts for the observed pattern of engagement while recognizing the strategic and discontinuous character of Irish classical reception.

Seamus Heaney and Marina Carr are the focus of the dissertation because they represent two different but complementary modes of engagement with Greek tragedy. Heaney, the Nobel Prize-winning poet who turned to drama later in his life, approaches Sophocles with what he calls a version: a technique that preserves the original's dramatic structure, character functions, and storyline while imposing interpretative inflection through language, tone, and selectivity of emphasis. Heaney stated that he was "looking for meaning, not language."² His Sophoclean versions do not relocate the action to Ireland, rename the characters, or alter the plot's outcome. Their political resonance emerges through texture: Ulster cadences, contemporary political idioms, the moral vocabulary of betrayal, trauma, and reconciliation that carries specific weight in the Northern Irish context.

Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* transposes Euripides' *Medea* from Corinth to the Irish Midlands, replaces the Corinthian chorus with a Traveler community, and changes the ending from divine escape to suicide and filicide. Her *Hecuba* shifts responsibility for Polydorus's murder from Polymestor to Agamemnon, making explicit a colonial allegory only latent in Euripides³. Heaney's fidelity to Sophoclean structure enables a meditation on reconciliation within inherited forms; Carr's dismantling of Euripidean structure enables a feminist and postcolonial critique that the original could not accommodate.

The choice of the five plays; Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), and Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), and *Hecuba* (2015) is meaningful. Heaney's versions respond to specific political moments: *The Cure at Troy* was written in 1990 during political stalemate, seven years before the ceasefires leading to the Good Friday Agreement and stages the dilemma of Philoctetes as an allegory for post-conflict

² Eileen Battersby, "A Greek Tragedy for Our Times," *The Irish Times*, April 3, 2004, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/a-greek-tragedy-for-our-times-1.1138235>.

³ Clare Wallace, "Marina Carr's *Hecuba*: Agency, Anger and Correcting Euripides," *Irish Studies Review* 27, no. 4 (2019): 512-14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2019.1663606>.

reconciliation as Chapter 3 will demonstrate. *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) reflects a different moment in world politics, including 9/11, the Iraq War, the rhetoric of the Bush administration, and the fragile peace of post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* premiered in 1998, the year of the Good Friday Agreement and the beginning of the Celtic Tiger, exposing the social exclusions that accompanied Ireland's economic boom. *Phedra Backwards* continues her work in feminist intervention, only this time it was written at the end of the Celtic Tiger period. Her *Hecuba* (2015) responds to the continuing visibility of war and displacement in the twenty-first century, the ongoing legacy of colonial violence, and the silencing of women in both classical and Irish culture. This pattern of *punctuated redeployments* challenges the continuity thesis that underlies much classical reception studies. Where social divisions are so sharp that political expression has been limited and traumatic history persists, Irish playwrights return to Greek tragedy strategically.

The clustering of Irish engagement with Greek tragedy around moments of political crisis is not coincidental. When political language is exhausted or corrupted by state power, playwrights resort to myth as a place to store other ethical systems. Greek tragedy provides a dramatic form that allows multiple claims to justice to be presented without resolution, a form that can be used to represent the un-resolvable nature of historical trauma. The Irish Literary Revival, the Troubles, the peace process and the Celtic Tiger all produced different patterns of classical adaptation, each of which was required to serve a different purpose in relation to the crisis, whether to build national identity, to frame the ethics of reconciliation, or to reveal the exclusions of economic modernization. The model of the *punctuated redeployments* takes into consideration not only the continuity of Irish engagement with Greek tragedy but also the historically and culturally particular nature of each redeploying moment.

The dissertation adopts a composite theoretical framework drawn from adaptation studies, reception theory, translation theory, postcolonial criticism, feminist theory, myth criticism, and performativity. The theory of adaptation (Hutcheon, Sanders) provides the basic vocabulary for distinguishing between version (Heaney's mode) and appropriation (Carr's mode). Reception theory (Hardwick, Martindale) sees no difference between text and context, but rather a conversation between the two: meaning is not transmitted but negotiated. The understanding of how Heaney works from the prose translations to create his own versions in poetry is influenced

by Walter Benjamin's idea of "afterlife" and George Steiner's "hermeneutic motion" from translation theory. Postcolonial theory (Said, Bhabha) shows Heaney's use of the English poetic forms as a mimicry that undermines the colonial authority, and how Carr's version of Hecuba is a colonial allegory. Feminist theory (Sihra, Kurdi, Paul) offers instruments to analyse how Carr's appropriations are sub-versions of the patriarchal assumptions that center previously ignored female figures.

In chapter 1, I explore the theoretical models that can help interpret such adaptations. Key to this chapter will be the theory of adaptation, specifically that of Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders, who have written extensively about adaptations and demonstrated that adaptation cannot be viewed merely as a derivative art form. For instance, in her *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Hutcheon explains how adaptation is "a process and a product" involving reinterpretation across temporal, cultural, and formal boundaries.⁴ Adaptation can be seen as creation and as an ideological intervention into the source texts. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005), Julie Sanders suggests that adaptation involves a much more radical kind of ideological reworking to deconstruct dominant ideological structures.⁵ This theoretical perspective is of particular relevance in Irish theater, especially in the context of adapting Greek tragedies into political works.

The chapter also incorporates insights from reception theory, specifically the writings of Lorna Hardwick, which highlight the fact that receptions of Greek tragedy are influenced just as much by the concerns of the receiving culture as they are by those of the classical texts themselves. Modern renditions of Greek tragedy often involve negotiations between cultures; whereby classical texts acquire meaning in relation to the modern political context in which they are placed.⁶ For the Irish context, this negotiation of culture is of special relevance as Greek tragedy continually engages issues such as colonialism and nationalism.

Furthermore, myth reception theory is incorporated into the project, namely as described by Mircea Eliade, James Frazer, and Károly Kerényi in their books. Understanding how ancient Greek tragedies have been reworked in contemporary Irish theater is made easier by Lorna Hardwick's

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵ Julia Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁶ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

examination of classical receptions. Moreover, to investigate gender dynamics in Marina Carr's adaptations, this study will also draw on feminist theoretical viewpoints, including the writings of Clare Wallace and Salomé Paul. To evaluate Heaney's versions' interaction with colonial and national identity, postcolonial theory will be employed, based on Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and imitation in *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), as well as other sources.

Eliade asserts that "myths relive their origins,"⁷ meaning that myths return to, recreate, or re-express the conditions and meanings from which they first came. But in their Irish versions, the stories are destabilized and challenged, rewritten to account for but not rehabilitate the past. The suggestion here is that Irish drama does not enact the "eternal return" of the myths, in which they re-enact their origins, but rather a *contested return*, in which the myths are the sites of the conflict of rival historical discourses, rather than cultural continuity.

Chapter 2 breaks into three interspersed track discourse, where each track examines a different play through different critical lens and examines different aspects of Carr's dramaturgy. The first subchapter, "*By the Bog of Cats*", considers how the play *is* a radical feminist rendition of the Greek myth of *Medea*. Not only does Carr employ radical feminist interpretation to the solitary figure of Hester Swane, her critique spreads to the society of women on the bog. These include women such as Monica Murray and Caroline Cassidy, Hester's rival, representing women who have been silenced and forgotten. These women, just like Hester, remain in this liminal state because of the interrelation of social, economic, and patriarchal forces that place them in the community and that constrain them from acting. In considering this constellation of female bodies, Carr speaks to the deep oppression of women under various systems in rural Ireland while simultaneously reclaiming the tragic mother from patriarchal traditions. In this manner, Hester becomes not only a symbol of female resistance against exclusion, dispossession, and gendered violence, but also the focal point through which the collective marginalization of the women of the bog is made visible.

Conversely, "A Body Without Organs: Rhizome Theory in *By the Bog of Cats*" proposes a Deleuzian theoretical approach to the study of the play's juxtaposing, discontinuous whole. A

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

reading of the text in light of the rhizome theory helps to reveal how Carr's deconstruction of hierarchical narratives constructs a theater outrance of plurality and against closure that thus poses a challenge to the normative paradigm of tragedy and identity. The very multiplicity is also made known through Carr's use of folklore and myth, most notably the Mélusine legend, which she used in her work to stand for a hybrid, unstable identity. In *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester's watery landscapes and ghostly ancestry speak to the Mélusine figure: a woman who is part human, part otherworldly in her liminality, caught between presence and absence within the community. With this invocation of Mélusine, Carr places Hester within a line of mythic women who are, by nature, liminal, malleable, and marginalized. Seen through the lens of the rhizome and the "body without organs" as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari, these mythic resonances highlight how Carr's dramaturgy undermines linear tragic teleology in favor of a networked, non-hierarchical vision of identity.

To continue this argumentative development, Hester will be situated within the liminal paradigm, especially in light of Victor Turner's seminal notion of "betwixt and between". According to Turner, the liminal stage of a rite holds in suspension human subjects who used to stand within classified boundaries and now find themselves being dismissed by societal norms or threats against it. Hester somehow exemplifies this state of liminality: On the one hand, she is not fully integrated into the settled community of the bog. On the other hand, she is not totally cast out but joins with these liminal spaces of the living and the dead, intersecting across human and spectral realms. The grave origin of her ghostly line and her own tragic fate only increase her in-betweenness, rendering her into a disruptive force in social, familial, and gendered hierarchies. In the Irish context, the liminality of Hester brings with it a national resonance of Ireland caught in between the Troubles and the fragile peace of the Good Friday Agreement: between violence and reconciliation, between colonial legacies and postcolonial futures. By applying Victor Turner's framework of liminality, Hester can be read as a figure suspended between social worlds, neither fully accepted by the settled community nor able to return to the life she has lost. This unresolved state mirrors Turner's notion of a subject caught between separation and reintegration, while also reflecting broader Irish anxieties around belonging, exclusion, and cultural identity.

The second subchapter then turn to Carr's adaptation of *Hecuba*. "Hecuba in the Contemporary World: A Postcolonial Reading of Modern Adaptations of Euripides' Hecuba" places Carr's text in

the wider field of 20th and 21st centuries rewritings of Hecuba that stretches all the way from the enduring legacy of Euripides to modern incarnations by the likes of Tony Harrison and Frank McGuinness. In placing Carr alongside this larger tradition, the section aims to show how Carr's dramaturgy inherits and how it likewise disrupts the conventions of receptions of tragedies. Carr's *Hecuba* is concerned with issues of colonization, imperial violence, and cycles of vengeance that speak directly to the Irish experience, where the history of British colonial dominance still haunts cultural memory. At the same time, the play resonates with a wider global postcolonial context, in which, far from being matters of history, the devastation of war, the silencing of female voices, and the precariousness of justice all remain current issues. Carr's decision to reinterpret *Hecuba* at the turn of the 21st century reveals her interest in using myth as a means to discuss, not only Ireland's centuries of violence, but also the transnational politics of domination and resistance.

More importantly, "Hecuba in the Contemporary World: Marina Carr's Usage of Free Indirect Speech" is a stylistic-narratological reading which examines the various functions of free indirect speech technique in the play. Carr employs this device not only as a formal experiment, but also as a means of making Hecuba's inner world more available, her grief, rage, and moral dilemmas more immediate and more complex. Free indirect speech acts to "acquit" Hecuba because it is not her who narrates the conclusion but her prophecy-doomed daughter, Cassandra, who is cursed to tell the truth. Thus, the audience can condemn cruelty without condemning Hecuba herself. At the same time, it shifts the frame and interrupts the flow by interposing several layers of mediation. It also provides evidence in court-like discourse, which is important for the play's rhetoric of testimony. By looking at these different functions, the subchapter shows how Carr uses the tragic stage to destabilize authority. This attention to free indirect speech supports the chapter's larger argument that Carr turns to classical myth to explore how trauma unsettles identity and reshapes the way history is remembered. Just as *By the Bog of Cats* permits a vision of Medea through feminized, rhizomatic and liminal paradigms, *Hecuba* highlights some ways of formally experimenting, including fragmented voice through indirect speech that make myth a dynamic vehicle for expressing both the wounds of Irish history and Ireland's connection to struggles globally.

Finally, *Phaedra Backwards: Temporal Reversal, Trauma, and the Critique of Patriarchal Myth* examines Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* as a radical appropriation of the Phaedra myth

through temporal reversal, structural fragmentation, and postmodern dramaturgy. By comparing Carr's play with Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Seneca's *Phaedra*, it explores how Carr dismantles the linear tragic structure of her predecessors to reconceptualize desire, familial trauma, displacement, and female agency. Carr refigures the classical myth as a modern critique of the power of patriarchy, the violence of inheritance, and the cyclicity of trauma, and thus shows how adaptation can be a process to challenge and refigure the ideologies of the old texts.

Seamus Heaney's two Sophoclean versions: *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), are analyzed in chapter 3. The chapter first places both plays in their institutional context, that of the Field Day theater Company and their conception of the fifth province which informed Heaney's method of classical translation. Section 3.1 examines *The Cure at Troy* using theoretical and political idiom as a lens, manifesting how Heaney's language of betrayal, wounding, and reconciliation facilitates the particular moral idiom of the Northern Irish Troubles. In Section 3.2 the text moves to *The Burial at Thebes*, considering Creon's rhetoric as an expression of authoritarian political language and the geopolitical climate after 9/11 and Antigone's mourning as a form of feminist opposition to state power. The chapter concludes that Heaney's notion of fidelity to Sophoclean structure should not be mistaken as conservatism, but rather as a tactic to contain and show the instability of the contemporary political moment.

Seamus Heaney's dramatic project is not just an aesthetic expression alone: it is an expression of the institutional and civic urgency of the Field Day theater Company. Started in Derry in 1980 by playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea, Field Day grew rapidly to feature a directorate including Heaney, Tom Paulin, Seamus Deane, and David Hammond, and was a conscious intervention in a polarized culture at the height of the Troubles. Although Field Day was a theatrical company, as Marilyn Richter's foundational scholarship shows, its real importance was that it was an intellectual salon that, through invention of a provisional, imaginative space, could challenge the binary impasse of Unionist and Republican discourses. Field Day's project, as Richter sees it, was "an intervention in the politics of culture," an attempt "to experiment with the possibility of a new relationship between art and politics."⁸ When faced with systemic violence, state censorship and entrenched sectarianism, the company used the stage as a space of

⁸ Marilyn J. Richter, *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics, 1980-1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

surrogate civic debate, to challenge the historical myths that underpinned the conflict, and pave the way to cultural decolonization.

The institutional vision of Field Day was the idea of the “fifth province”. Realizing that Ireland’s four geographical provinces were hopelessly divided politically and religiously, the directorate suggested a ‘fifth province’, an intellectual and creative province of the mind, where cultural differences could be usefully negotiated without the immediate need for political consensus. This project was intentionally anti-hegemonic, Richtarik argues, an attempt to dismantle the single-story versions of the British colonial power and of strict Irish nationalism. Field Day aimed to develop an artistic program in which a pluralistic identity, shared by people on both sides of the Irish border, could be rehearsed, through the publication of political pamphlets, and the touring of theatrical works.

The Civic Urgency of Heaney’s debut drama for the company, *The Cure at Troy*, comes very much out of this fifth province framework. Staged during a profound political stalemate, years after the Anglo-Irish Agreement but before the fragile breakthroughs of the 1990s peace process, the play was commissioned and performed as an explicit manifestation of Field Day’s cultural mission. By transmuting Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* through an Ulster register, Heaney did not seek to provide an escapist allegory; instead, he utilized the classical framework to stage the very imaginative breakthroughs that Field Day championed. The company’s institutional demand was to find a language that could acknowledge historical trauma without becoming paralyzed by it. *The Cure at Troy* becomes a direct theatrical experiment in testing whether a deeply divided public could collectively imagine a crippled trust beginning to emerge.

The dissertation has explored how contemporary Irish playwrights Marina Carr and Seamus Heaney interpret Greek tragedy to confront the consequences of colonialism, sectarianism, and gender oppression. It has asked why, in an art form that is rooted in classical Greece and that often tends to make ‘universal’ assertions, Greek tragedy has turned out to be so productive for Irish playwrights who seek to address questions and issues that are specifically local. The dissertation has posited that Carr and Heaney mobilize myth not as a coded language buried in the past but as an open and active text and tool for the exploration of political, cultural, and ethical issues. Their adaptations are *punctuated redeployments* that the dissertation has discussed: strategic resorts to classical material in moments of perceived political crisis, cultural and ethical uncertainty.

A second major discovery in the dissertation relates to the role of myth itself over the course of time. In classical tradition, myth is often an explanatory device that makes divine will, destiny, and historical cataclysm comprehensible. In the more contemporary Irish adaptations studied here, however, myth no longer is an explanation of what ails the human heart, but rather a witness to it. These adaptations do not seek to validate political or cosmic order but rather to keep the voices of their protagonists, those whose histories are silenced by official accounts, both audible and visible, while not reconciling the dilemmas also presented by these histories. Myth thus becomes less a mechanism of explanation and more an act of testimony that allows for the continuity of memory without dominating, facile narratives of closure or reconciliation.

The dissertation began by outlining the theories of adaptation and appropriation, based on Linda Hutcheon, Julie Sanders, and postcolonial theorists, Edward Said, Robert Young, and Homi Bhabha. These frameworks acted as a methodological grounding for considering Irish appropriation of Greek tragedy not only in terms of translation and fidelity, but also as a series of cultural and political interventions for their respective eras. The difference between version (Heaney's mode in which he maintains the Sophoclean structure but adds modes of interpretation) and appropriation (Carr's mode in which she completely changes the setting, characterization, and ideology) has been important to understanding the political and ethical implications resulting from each playwright's mode of adaptation.

The main contribution of this dissertation is that Greek tragedy does not just provide Irish playwrights with a repository of narrative material but serves as a means of political communication which is an alternative to the sphere of conventional political language. By using classical tragedy as a form of expression, not merely to describe historical events, but to express ethical dilemmas that political rhetoric does not offer adequate language to describe, both Heaney and Carr are able to do so. Both *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes* examine the political when it is stalled, and Carr's adaptations reveal the psychological and cultural legacy of displacement, gendered violence, and inherited trauma. Greek tragedy therefore becomes less a repository of ancient stories than a performative language capable of mediating between historical experience and ethical reflection. The dissertation demonstrates that the continued relevance of Greek tragedy lies precisely in its ability to articulate conflicts for which contemporary political discourse often proves insufficient.

List of Publications

Jaber, Soltan. "Betwixt and Between: Hester Swane as a Liminal Symbol of Irish Identity." *Sapiens Ubique Civis*, vol. 6, 2025, pp. 287–301.

—. "Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Tragedy: Navigating Trauma and Moral Dilemmas in *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*." *FOCUS: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2025, pp. 25–41.

—. "Hecuba in the Contemporary World: Marina Carr's Usage of Reported Speech." *Serbian Association for the Study of English Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2025, pp. 47–56.

—. "'A Wind Wanting a Flag': Universal Ethics and Mythic Form in the Drama of Seamus Heaney." In *Tavaszi Szél Konferencia 2025: Tanulmánykötet I (Spring Wind Conference 2025)*, edited by Dániel Molnár and Dóra Molnár, 273–280. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (DOSZ), 2025.

—. "Beyond Tradition in *By the Bog of Cats*: Marina Carr's Feminist Reimagining of *Medea*." In *XXVII. Tavaszi Szél Konferencia 2024: Tanulmánykötet I (Spring Wind Conference 2024)*, edited by Dániel Molnár, Dóra Molnár, and Adrián Szilárd Nagy, 397–403. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége (DOSZ), 2024.