Seamus Heaney and the Politics of Tragedy: Navigating Trauma and Moral Dilemmas in *The Cure at Troy* and *The Burial at Thebes*

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Abstract

This paper examines how institutional contexts, both theatrical and political, influence the production and reception of Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), versions of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Antigone*, respectively. Heaney, known for actively participating in Dublin protests to support global equality and for visiting South Africa during the apartheid years, wrote *The Cure at Troy* during the later years of the Northern Irish Troubles, long before any formal peace process had materialized, thereby embedding Irish political and social realities within the play's ethical fabric. The play became part of the broader institutional framework addressing the Troubles, as its performances often occurred in the shadow of political turmoil, shaping the audience's outlook. Similarly, *The Burial at Thebes* comments on the military and political forces of Unionist and Nationalist organizations during and following the Troubles, using theatre to navigate the ethical dilemmas of patriotism, familial obligation, and honoring the deceased. The plays' performance history, especially in institutional contexts such as the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, demonstrates the impact of cultural production on political institutions and vice versa. The interplay between tragedy and institutional issues is further emphasized by the political suggestions in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, which reflect Alcibiades' resurgence–a Greek general expected to return from exile to offer military guidance during the Second Peloponnesian War. In this respect, Heaney's drama mirrors Sophocles' work, as both authors engage with their respective political landscapes through performance.

Keywords: the Troubles in Northern Ireland, *The Cure at Troy*, *The Burial at Thebes*, trauma, moral dilemmas

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Introduction

Seamus Heaney is celebrated for his poetry that "exalt[s] everyday miracles and the living past" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 1995"), while simultaneously engaging with contemporary political realities. This dual focus is especially evident in his

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theatrical adaptations, where his engagement with both cultural institutions (such as the Abbey and Lyric Theatres) and political forces (the postcolonial state and paramilitary organizations) shapes how his versions of Greek tragedy were written and received. Though best known as a poet, Heaney authored two versions of Sophocles' tragedies: *The Cure at Troy* (1990), (hereafter *The Cure*), from *Philoctetes*, and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), (hereafter *The Burial*), from *Antigone*. His plays maintain a poetic quality while departing from traditional Irish and Greek theatrical conventions—for example, by giving the Chorus in *The Burial* an active voice rather than a passive one.

While not a politician, the Northern Irish Troubles profoundly influenced Heaney's writing, and his public statements frequently reflected his ethical engagement with the conflict. His poetry collection *North* (1975)[1] marked an early shift of poetic focus from the personal confines of early works like "Digging" and "Mid-Term Break" (both from the volume *Death of a Naturalist* 1966) to an exploration of politics, myth, and violence. He was also moved by global struggles for justice. In his Nobel Prize lecture (1995), Heaney described his poem "St Kevin and the Blackbird" as "a story out of Ireland" that could just as easily have emerged from "India or Africa or the Arctic or the Americas" (*Crediting Poetry*). His admiration for figures like Nelson Mandela—whom he identified as a source of inspiration for *The Cure*—reinforces the global moral reach of his adaptations: "The marooned man in Sophocles' play helps the Greeks who betrayed him to win Troy. It seemed to me to mesh beautifully with Mandela's return. The act of betrayal, and then the generosity of his coming back and helping with the city – helping the polis to get together again" (Heaney in Johnson).

Heaney's theatrical turn is a formal departure from poetry and a strategic engagement with the cultural institution of theatre as a site for public reckoning. In Ireland, theatre has served as a national forum for over a century, where the dramatization and contestation of institutional power, collective grief, and civic values are explored and debated. Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that a theatrical adaptation is not merely a transfer of deep content, but a performative act of cultural intervention informed "by the negotiation and definition of positions – by shifting power relations" (44). For Heaney, it is a space where he could confront the ethical positions of the Northern Irish Troubles and invite a collective consideration of recovery, justice, and moral choice. Commissioned and staged by large institutions such as the Abbey Theatre, Heaney's plays fostered an interaction that was both wider and deeper than that achieved through poetry alone. These productions were shaped by the institutional agendas of nationally funded theatres, which promoted cultural diplomacy and national mythmaking.

Any meaningful engagement with the cultural and political situation in Northern Ireland cannot be achieved without reference to the long history of British colonialism in Ireland and the unique circumstances of partition in 1921. Although the roots of British colonial presence in Ireland date back to the 12th century, specifically to the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169, by the end of the 19th century, well-established

1 The title *North* is widely interpreted as a reference to Northern Ireland, where Heaney was born and raised.

"militant nationalist endeavour[s]" had emerged in Ireland, including calls for Home Rule (Jackson 3). These aspirations faced fierce resistance from the Protestant Unionist population concentrated in the northeastern counties, who had strong political, economic, and cultural ties to Britain (Jackson 4).

Following the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), the island was partitioned by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, which created the Irish Free State in the south and led to the establishment of Northern Ireland as a separate six-county unit within the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, the rest of the island was drafting a constitution and establishing national institutions for its new state, which would later become the Republic of Ireland. From its founding in 1922, Northern Ireland featured a structure of institutionalized discrimination. "Protestants were given privileged access to public authority housing; Catholic houses were located in electoral wards that were already majority Catholic and would not erode Protestant political majorities" (Ruane and Todd 120).

Thus, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland increasingly represented two diverging political trajectories: one postcolonial and sovereign; the other "*semi-colonial*" (Arkins 26),[2] structurally exclusionary and politically contested, conditions that fueled ongoing debates around sovereignty, identity, and citizenship throughout the 20th and 21stcenturies. Northern Ireland's ambiguous status makes postcolonial analysis particularly suited to explore how Heaney's plays reflect unresolved trauma and contested sovereignty. Throughout this paper, I use the term *colonial* to frame Northern Ireland's cultural and political conditions before, during, and after the Troubles. While the complications arising from its constitutional status within the United Kingdom limit some traditional notions of postcoloniality—such as Bhabha's hybridity or Said's view of imperialism as a cultural project—it has prompted scholars like Joe Cleary to adopt alternative terms, including *semi-colonial*, to describe Northern Ireland's ambiguous and uneven relationship to British state power.

These historical and ideological conditions laid the groundwork for what Niall Ó Dochartaigh calls "the long, slow half-century before the Troubles" (142), in which communal polarization and institutional discrimination persisted. In Derry, "activists had staged sit-ins, pickets, and protests through 1967 and 1968. Very few people had been mobilized on the issue of housing, but a cohort of new activists had nonetheless gained experience and had begun to build new networks" (Ó Dochartaigh 148). These civil rights campaigns signaled the beginning of broader resistance to systemic inequality. They directly preceded the violent escalation of the Troubles (1969–1998), a period of hostility, sectarian fights, and competing claims to justice within a system of inequality.

These claims were embodied in the positions of Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists in Northern Ireland, as well as in the violence of various

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2 Semi-colonial refers to a condition in which a region or nation is formally a part of another, larger political entity, like an empire or a union, yet it faces outright cultural, political, or economic domination. It embodies a painful contradiction: being both governed and marginalized. A semi-colonial nation is neither endowed with full autonomy, nor given its due in the classical sense of being a colony, similar to Northern Ireland.

paramilitary organizations, including, but not limited to, the IRA (Irish Republican Army), INLA (Irish National Liberation Army), loyalist groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and the Ulster Defense Association (UDA). State reactions and a loyalist backlash arose in response to the emergence of the Catholic population's civil rights movement in the late 1960s, as demands for equality in housing, voting, and employment gained momentum. The British Army's interference in 1969 marked a new phase of both military and paramilitary escalation. Over the next thirty years, the collective psyche and institutional structures in the region were shaped by bombings, assassinations, and hunger strikes. Paramilitary violence affected even the moral principles of those who were not its direct victims. According to Neil Ferguson, "Young people from areas characterized by high levels of political violence presented significantly lower levels of moral maturity" (237). Within such a society fractured by sectarian division, issues of morality became increasingly relative, where each side found justification for its position. These lower levels of moral maturity often led to escalated acts of violence, as it happened during the Troubles. Even after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, "it should be remembered that Loyalist violence is still happening more than 10 years after their 1994 ceasefires—meaning that the immediate post-Agreement period was by no means marked by an absence of Loyalist paramilitary violence" (Steenkamp 161). Additionally, "There followed a period of some eight years in which false starts, political blockades, police reform and the enormous challenges of military de-commissioning were faced" (Bruce 14). These distorted moral frameworks not only facilitated the continued existence of violence but also created an ethical void that Irish theater interrogates. Heaney's dramas, written before and after the Belfast Agreement respectively, reflect different aspects of the complexity of the ethical and psychological entanglements characterizing the Northern Irish situation.

This paper argues that Heaney's adaptations of Sophocles' tragedies do not offer solutions to political violence but rather dramatize the ethical weight of decision-making within unresolved colonial and sectarian contexts. *The Cure* and *The Burial* use ancient structures to explore psychic scars, highlight institutional failures, and stage the human cost of fractured sovereignty. By placing personal ethical dilemmas in the public arena of theatre, Heaney provides a model for how drama can be a space for colonial moral inquiry. The paper asks: How does *The Cure* reflect and rework conflicts? How does Heaney rework Sophocles' structure and characters in *Philoctetes* to address institutional power, justice, and public morality in Northern Ireland? What are the constitutional fears *Antigone* exposes? How does *The Burial* test sovereignty, moral authority, and state power questions in post-agreement Northern Ireland? To answer these questions, the paper draws on adaptation- and postcolonial theories, including the works of Frantz Fanon, Seamus Deane, Edward Said, Graham Dawson, and Ngũg wa Thiong'o, who provide a postcolonial lens to understand how colonial violence, inherited trauma, and moral paralysis shape both individual and national identities in Heaney's dramas. It further draws on post-conflict ethics, which explore moral responsibility, civic repair, and memory in societies transitioning from violence, as well as critical readings of Irish theatre. It first broadens the political and moral ground of the Troubles before comparing key thematic departures and

formal choices in Heaney's versions. These shifting moral perspectives were not only individual responses but also reflections of long-standing institutional legacies: partisan education systems, collisions of church teachings, and the systemic inequalities embedded in British governance, including discriminatory policing and unequal access to housing.

Conflict, Politics, and the *Agōn*: Heaney's Reworking of *Philoctetes*

In Heaney's reinterpretation of Philoctetes in *The Cure*, the dynamics of moral contest and public speech foreground the atmosphere of the Troubles. Heaney's Irish versions primarily focus on reinterpreting the original narratives. However, they also incorporate specific dramatic devices that he deemed necessary to convey deeper meanings, such as the expansion of the Chorus into a commentary and prophetic voice, and the imposition of modern political idioms in his characters' speeches. A dramatic device employed in Greek tragedies is the *agōn* (γώ̇ν), meaning "contest" or "struggle," which refers to a structured debate or confrontation between opposing characters in classical Greek drama. It serves as a tool for characters to defend their positions and moral perspectives. The same effect is evident in *The Cure*, where the audience witness a dispute between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus over Neoptolemus' false promise to Philoctetes of taking him back to Mount Oeta[3] via Scyros. Both characters defend their positions with all the reasons they can offer and claim their own merits. Philoctetes embodies honor, while Neoptolemus represents deceit. This ideological clash sets the stage for the intense confrontation that follows.

Once Neoptolemus reveals the true aim of his and Odysseus' mission—taking back Philoctetes to the Greek camp in Troy to help win the war—Philoctetes feels betrayed and manipulated. He hastily curses Neoptolemus and accuses him of forgetting his noble descent and of lying. In response, Neoptolemus attempts to justify his actions by claiming they are for the benefit of the state: "I cannot./There's a cause, a plan, big moves,/And I'm a part of them. I'm under orders" (*The Cure* 51). He argues that deception was necessary to end the war and serve the greater good. Philoctetes then calls Neoptolemus a "sacrilegious/Heartbreaking little coward" and continues:

> But the man you tricked
> Was never the man you came to snatch away.
> You'll be showing off a phantom to the Greeks
> And your big name and fame will always be
> Hollow to the core.
> You faced nothing here.
> You overpowered a cripple without weapons,

3 Philoctetes' insistence on being led to Mount Oeta, not back home, is symbolic. In Greek mythology, Oeta was the site of Hercules' death and apotheosis, a mountain of metamorphosis and divine ascension. The insistence on going to Oeta thus marks Philoctetes' path to healing, meaning, and spiritual salvation.

> And even then, you did it underhand.
> O son, be yourself again. This isn't you.
> Give me the bow. (*The Cure* 52)

Through the *agōn*, Heaney stresses the importance of dialogue in torn-apart societies. Although the issues of conflict and distress emerge from the play in general terms, they mainly refer to the tensions of his own time. In an interview with Mark Carruthers, Heaney stated that he wanted to "envisage a society where ethnic groups, religious groups, political groups would find a way of living a civic life." However, he also depicted the agony experienced by the Northern Irish people, a reality he had endured. Heaney's reading of the *agōn* can also be a commentary on institutional politics: both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus represent figures caught between the powerful influences of institutional forces. The play's layered representation of conflict and moral responsibility is further explored through the political dimensions in Heaney's drama.

According to Michael Vickers, "In his *The Cure at Troy* (1990) Seamus Heaney reshaped Sophocles' play in order to make it fit the contemporary political picture" (59). Heaney's version amplifies the political resonances of Sophocles' original, contributing to scholarly debates about the tragedy's original purpose, particularly the claim that it carried political connotations on Alcibiades' comeback, a renowned Greek general with fluctuating allegiances during the final stages of the Peloponnesian War. Alcibiades was expected to return after his banishment to offer military guidance and strategic advice, a scenario that infused the original play with a contemporary political picture. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that "adaptation is a form of repetition without replication," and with this repetition come "corresponding modifications in the political valence" (XVI). Accordingly, Heaney's version is not just a literary tribute; it is a "new" story, "told – and understood – for the very first time" (Sanders 104). Heaney puts these statements to practical use through a purposeful recontextualization of the classical material in the modern ethical and political landscape. Vickers states that "Heaney's veiled political analogue is thus in principle identical with Sophocles' treatment of events of his own day," suggesting that Sophocles' characters allude to contemporary Athenian figures like Andocides and Pericles (59).[4] Sophocles embeds his play in political tensions within the mythic frame; a strategy Heaney adopts by aligning Philoctetes with figures like Mandela.

Heaney's classical allusions are not simply ornamental; they also carry urgent contemporary significance. In particular, *The Cure* speaks directly to the moral complexities of the Northern Irish Troubles. According to Marilynn Richtarik, Neoptolemus's journey through conflicting loyalties to Odysseus and his conscience stands in stark contrast to Northern Irish politician John Hume's shuttling between loyalty to his nationalist party, the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party), and his larger vision for peace to end the Troubles. Similarly, the uneasy partnership

4 According to Vickers, Sophocles' characters may have reflected political figures from his time: Philoctetes and Neoptolemus both echo aspects of Alcibiades, the controversial Athenian general; Odysseus and the Merchant parallel Andocides, his political rival; and Hercules recalls Pericles, a symbol of stability and vision in ancient Greece.

between Hume and Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin—rooted in a shared commitment to peace—echoes the tense yet enduring relationship between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, forged for the common good (Richtarik). Heaney was highly acquainted with the unpredictable political nature of such moral compromises. Richtarik writes in her "Reality and Justice: Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*" that Heaney praised Hume for his "attentive intelligence and sympathy for his opponent" (108), qualities reflected in Neoptolemus's moral evolution. Neoptolemus' willingness to disregard the interests of his party reflects Hume's daring decision to engage with Adams in the face of overwhelming criticism from both British and Irish political entities, who accused him of legitimizing violence and undermining the rule of law by negotiating with Sinn Féin.

Thus, Heaney's *Philoctetes* navigates the difference between private pain and public expectation. The dramatic frame is wholly rooted in the Greek tragic mode, while also answering to the poet's contemporary moment. Written eight years before the Belfast Agreement, instead of marking a simple path to reconciliation, *The Cure* foregrounds the real difficulty of ethical decision-making in a time filled with inherited grievances and political anxiety. Its hopeful notes are tempered by the unhealed trauma of the period, providing less a resolution than an invitation to imagine a moral alternative to cyclical violence. This is not an assertion of drama as a template for a specific political settlement, but rather as an acknowledgement of the mechanism by which myth, adapted, may become a vehicle for public yearning and ethical reflection.

Abandoned and Traumatized: *The Cure at Troy*

The Cure mythologizes the long-term impact of violence on troubled nations, suggesting that inherited wounds—like Philoctetes' festering injury—are not only physical but deeply political and emotional. Like Philoctetes in Heaney's work, survivors of the Troubles are severed from both past and future; their wounded, ongoing existence continues to mold their feelings of nationhood. As Graham Dawson writes in *Making Peace with the Past? Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (2007), "3500 people had died as a direct result of the Troubles by the time the peace process was launched. Their families and friends continue to bear the psychic scars of these deaths" (60).This legacy of suffering haunts the play's interpersonal conflicts, especially those which trap Neoptolemus between Odysseus' authority and Philoctetes' pain. Hugh Denard notes that Heaney's version "boldly opened up a dialogue between its Sophoclean model and the culture and politics of Northern Ireland," offering both "the experience of suffering" and "a vision of miraculous redemption" (2). Yet that redemption is never easy or clean. As Jennifer Kosak observes, "Both older men attempt to influence the value system and behavior of the younger man" (94), a dynamic that mirrors the pressure placed on Northern Irish youth. Neoptolemus thus becomes entrapped in a loop of loyalty, obligation, and inherited trauma. In Northern Ireland, Helen Brocklehurst argues, institutions like "schools, youth organisations and families" were key to the process of children becoming politicized which then reinforced divides in their communities and embedded conflict at a generational level.

This generational entrapment is not only cultural but also ideological in nature. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon writes on colonial youth recruited into revolutionary violence and argues that even militant resistance can bear the imprint of trauma. Though nationalist politics may be grounded in violence, they are, Fanon insists, "national, revolutionary, and social," forming "the essence of the fight which explodes the old colonial truths and reveals unexpected facets, which brings out new meanings and pinpoints the contradictions camouflaged by these facts" (147). In this sense, Neoptolemus's inner conflict reflects how young people in Northern Ireland inherited the legacies of historical ordeals they did not necessarily understand yet were compelled to either enact or resist. More broadly, *The Cure* offers a compelling metaphor for the dilemmas of distressed societies. The abandonment of Philoctetes on Lemnos finds an echo in the isolation faced by victims during and long after the violence ends, and in the ways institutions fail to reintegrate the wounded or rebuild trust. Heaney demonstrates Neoptolemus's divided loyalties and reveals how intergenerational trauma repeats itself in the young, a theme that resonates with many colonial and conflicted societies, such as Northern Ireland, in which collective identity relies on affiliation rather than autonomy.

In spite of that, Heaney's Philoctetes insists that both personal and social healing require the effort to be reconciled with others and the inward work of reclaiming agency. In both Sophocles' and Heaney's versions, the struggle is not over arms or loyalty: it is over agency. Thus, the play is a representation of "efforts by all three men to acquire and/or maintain control over others, but even more important, efforts to retain or obtain control over their individual selves" (Kosak 94). This struggle for individual sovereignty is the beginning of any ethical future. Fanon reminds us that "by its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist" (94); it flattens both land and consciousness. Thus, Heaney's Philoctetes becomes a representative not of the healed but the hopeful subject. As Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), while colonial subjects are "excluded, to some degree subjugated, and deeply disappointed", ultimately, they will respond "from within [the colonial experience]", producing counter-narratives that question and rewrite its terms (248). Although Philoctetes is not a literal colonial subject (similar to Northern Ireland), he plays this symbolic role: wounded, silenced, but still speaking. His concluding words do not offer closure but a fragile step toward trust: "I leave/Half-ready to believe/That a crippled trust might walk" (*The Cure* 81). This is an incomplete sentence—politically and emotionally. Recovery, Heaney suggests, is neither divinely bestowed nor imposed from on high. Recovery begins with inward work.

Ultimately, Heaney's characterization captures Philoctetes' enduring suffering through a sensitive portrayal of emotional vulnerability, as exhibited by his disturbed response at the mere mention of Odysseus, his persecutor. When Philoctetes pleads with Neoptolemus not to turn against him and names Odysseus, invoking treachery, calling him "contemptible and plausible and dangerous" (*The Cure* 23), his distress becomes evident. Later in the play, Odysseus suddenly intervenes during the exchange of the bow and arms between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, challenging Neoptolemus' decision and reviving memories of Philoctetes' suffering. Upon hearing Odysseus' voice, Philoctetes answers: "Odysseus! That voice!/It has to

be". Odysseus affirms his identity with: "That was and is!" Immediately, images of betrayal and agony resurface, and Philoctetes responds with accusations: "And when else but now?/*Hangmen and betrayers* never show (my emphasis)/Till the moment's ripe" (*The Cure* 54). Philoctetes' response to Odysseus' appearance showcases his psychological rupture from the marooning that happened to him ten years earlier. His anguish reveals the long-lasting and deep-rooted nature of his misery, mirroring the testimonies of those suffering from the Troubles-related trauma. Philoctetes' lingering anguish demonstrates how past wounds, whether personal or collective, do not simply disappear with time but remain buried in memory, emerging when prompted by betrayal and loss. Such a portrayal suggests the endurance of trauma in individuals long after the event, especially in cases where institutions have failed to acknowledge and redress the harm done. It is this very pain that hints at the possibility of release, suggesting that the first step towards healing might be through the expression of pain.

The Cure as Catharsis: Speech, Resentment, and Healing in Northern Ireland

Upon a close reading of *The Cure*, a reader might assume that the resolution lies in supernatural healing—perhaps in the *deus ex machina* appearance of Hercules—or simply in Philoctetes finally receiving his cure after years of abandonment by the Greeks on Lemnos. However, such assumptions gradually give way to the realization that the proper cure lies in the efficacy of speech, which Freud called the "talking cure". Earlier psychoanalysts believed that speech engendered catharsis, while some recent thinkers believe that the intervention of language creates effects such as symptom relief and emotional coherence. In this respect, Heaney's play becomes more than a reworking of Sophocles' text; it becomes a venue for the articulation and recognition of suffering. On the articulation of traumatic memories, Dawson states that the voices of the victims of the Troubles "speak from new positions and express new, emergent meanings that open up possibilities for reparative remembering on a number of levels" (254). Philoctetes' verbalization of his agony, his pain, the betrayal, and the act of voicing these wounds are all primary stages in his healing. This initial process of confronting and beginning to understand these wounds contrasts with Heaney's broader cultural project, exemplified by his public statements and writing, where he advocates for language as a tool for unity and redress. Thus, *The Cure* captures the healing nature of articulating one's pain, both for an individual and for audiences traumatized by it.

However, as much as words can heal, they can also bring about great resentment, which is manifested in Philoctetes' speeches, expressing not only a desire to speak of betrayal but to punish those who have wronged him. Philoctetes voices his anguish through an intense lament about the Greeks' betrayal and a decade of abandonment: "Every day has been a weeping wound/For ten years now. Ten years' misery and starvation-/That's all my service ever got for me./That's what I have to thank Odysseus for/And Menelaus and Agamemnon./Gods curse them all!/I ask for the retribution

I deserve./I solemnly beseech the gods to strike/The sons of Atreus in retaliation" (*The Cure* 19). His grievance against Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon echoes the voices of many in Northern Ireland who have demanded justice, accountability, or, at times, even acknowledgement of historical wrongs. Philoctetes' need to name his tormentors and make his suffering public is analogous to the Northern Irish society's need to testify, to speak, and to be heard.

While there is no definite remedy in *The Cure*, Heaney suggests that coexistence is achievable through resolution and commitment. This hope is stressed in the exchange of Hercules' bow and arrows between Neoptolemus and Odysseus. Neoptolemus wrestles with the decision to steal the bow from Philoctetes and give it to Odysseus. He acknowledges "candour before canniness/Doing the right thing/And not just saying it" (*The Cure* 67). Neoptolemus's morals, rooted in his noble heritage as the son of Achilles, lead him to reject the deceptive scheme. Subsequently, Odysseus summons the power of the Greeks, to which Neoptolemus is bound, to compel obedience, like Hume and Adams, who, despite personal convictions, found themselves navigating the demands of larger nationalist and unionist communities, ultimately choosing dialogue over ideology.

Nevertheless, Neoptolemus reminds Odysseus that "the jurisdiction I am under here/Is justice herself. She isn't only Greek" (*The Cure* 67), invoking a higher, universal sense of justice over the parochial interests of the Greek forces. In this context, Heaney meditates on divine and universal justice based on moral truth, not on political expediency. Such a consideration of justice is utterly opposed to that found in the British Government's design of a colonial system, where order and control always took precedence over accountability. In this manner, the stage becomes, in the words of Ngũg wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), a decolonial space in which playwrights confront the threat of imperialism "with the higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle" (3). *The Cure* does not simply restage Sophoclean drama but reworks the myth into a public confrontation where authority, legitimacy, and resistance are addressed. By this formulation, *The Cure* critiques not only the historical context of Northern Ireland but also provides a broader philosophical and ethical conceptualization of the goals toward healing.

The Burial at Thebes: Moral Dilemmas

If *The Cure* explores moral responsibility through interpersonal and political betrayal, *The Burial* sharpens the ethical stakes by confronting law, loyalty, and civil resistance through the lens of Antigone's defiance. Sophocles' *Antigone* has been reinterpreted again and again for ages, and few tragedies have been more long-lived or adaptable. Its underlying conflict—between conscience and public law, between family duty and civic duty—is fertile ground for performing constitutional crises. These tensions have come to renewed currency in contemporary conflicts where state authority's legitimacy is called into question. To explore Heaney's *The Burial*, it is essential first to grasp why this ancient narrative persists, especially in communities torn apart by political violence, sectarianism, or colonial disorder.

Antigone has long served as a vehicle for staging resistance, from Anouilh's Nazi-era France to Fugard's apartheid South Africa. In modern Irish drama, which often intertwines classical texts with political themes, the tragedy has consistently been re-imagined to speak to Ireland's conflicts over sovereignty, civil disobedience, and the legitimacy of state authority. W.B. Yeats, drawing on his previous translations of the Theban plays, revived *Antigone* in his 1939 poem "From the Antigone", calling up the emotional center of the Eros Chorus in an era of global crisis; Aidan Carl Mathews wrote an *Antigone* play (1984) which transposes the title character's defiance through the lens of 1980s Ireland, undermining her legendary status to portray a divided country; Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1985) re-situates the play as a condemnation of sectarianism; and Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone* (1996) explores the psychological toll of divided loyalty. These works testify to a long-standing interest in *Antigone*'s constitutional and moral problems—issues Seamus Heaney addresses in *The Burial*, which occupies a vital place in Irish and global theatre due to its poetic refinement and political necessity. Written for the centenary of Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 2004, Heaney's *Antigone* spoke to the conflicted politics of the time, e.g., the Iraq War and the uneasy peace following the Belfast Agreement. The timeless conflict instituted by Sophocles between individual conscience and state power now has its contemporary urgency revived in a time of global insecurity and a need for reconciliation within the homeland. Productions on both sides of the Atlantic—such as the 2006 staging at the University of Michigan and the 2016 revival by the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York—sustain the play's vigor in addressing the moral limits of political authority, especially when national security is being invoked to justify repression.

Like *Antigone*, *The Burial* is politically resonant, as burial, kinship, and civil disobedience are core themes that highlight the tragedy's longevity. Bonnie Honig, for example, states that Antigone is not simply "a lamenting sister" but a "political actor embroiled in fifth-century burial, kinship, and polis politics" (2). Heaney maintains those central tensions (private grief versus public law, familial duty versus state power) while refracting their voice through Northern Ireland's moral landscape. In it, disobedience and unyielding resolve from Antigone and Creon, respectively, take on the Troubles-era struggle between individual conscience and state-imposed authority. Heaney's play demonstrates how classical conflicts persist in a divided society struggling with the legacies of violence and contested legitimacy.

In the article "Another Irish Antigone: Gendering Justice in Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*", Matthew McGuire states that "Irish writing has asked vital questions about the role of literature in the aftermath of political conflict and has explored the possibilities afforded by various genres (including tragedy) to chart this theoretically complex and ethically fraught terrain" (289). His observation highlights the role of theatre in addressing moral dilemmas within the context of Northern Irish political institutions, which have been profoundly influenced by the conflict. Neil Corcoran further emphasizes how in Heaney's play, while the themes are of global relevance, "The idiom is markedly Irish: 'You have me scared'; 'Somebody's after attending to it', and so on; and the 'guard' - the Irish word for 'policeman'—is particularly Irish in idiom and accent, and is also (wittily) elevated from low-life prose to more heroic blank verse when he steels himself to rebuke Creon and then pityingly

hauls Antigone before him" (Corcoran). These stylistic and linguistic shifts bring to the fore the play's institutional critique, whereby the state's political, legal, and moral authority—most notably voiced through policing and law—is refracted through the discourses of Heaney's Northern Irish context. Thus, Heaney's Antigone does not merely engage in long-standing questions of morality but recasts them in the context of a particularly Irish one, where the relationship between citizens and the state and the operation of institutional power within a divided society is made all the timelier.

The Burial's moral commentary on the Troubles is further evident in "The Jayne Lecture: Title Deeds: Translating a Classic". In this lecture, Heaney draws parallels between the burial of Polyneices, Antigone's brother, and that of a Northern Irish Catholic hunger striker, Francis Hughes, who died in 1981 and was considered a criminal by the British government under Margaret Thatcher. Heaney recounts how Hughes's body was treated as state property:

> Before the remains of the deceased could be removed that evening from Toome, they had first to be removed from a prison some thirty or forty miles away. And for that first leg of the journey the security forces deemed it necessary to take charge and to treat the body effectively as state property. The living man had, after all, been in state custody as a terrorist and a murderer, a criminal lodged in Her Majesty's Prison at the Maze, better known in Northern Ireland as the H Blocks. He was a notorious figure in the eyes of Margaret Thatcher's government, but during the months of April and May 1981 he was the focus of the eyes of the world's media. (411)

Heaney finds affinities with the burial rites of IRA hunger strikers like Francis Hughes and Bobby Sands and those of Polyneices: all are branded as traitors under state institutional authority and are denied their proper dignity and burial rights, despite their sacrifices for what they viewed as a national liberation cause. This affinity with Northern Ireland and *The Burial* underscores Heaney's commitment to his nation. Furthermore, by associating Polyneices with Hughes, Heaney suggests that the head of the British government at the time, Margaret Thatcher, mirrors King Creon in her tyranny. Heaney reveals that Thatcher "stated with a too brutal simplicity that 'Crime is crime, is crime. It is not political'". Moreover, she greeted the news of the death of Bobby Sands, saying, "Mr Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life. It was a choice that his organization did not allow to many of its victims" (Heaney 412). Thatcher's train of thought provokes Heaney's critique of political oppression and his empathy for those who resisted it. Much like Said's notion of the "secular critic" (56), who questions conventional national tales, Antigone in Heaney's treatment becomes a figure of opposition to colonial governance and legal absolutism—a figure who embodies the marginal voice silenced by the state's claim to moral righteousness. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern figures of resistance sets the stage for Heaney's broader exploration of the moral and political fractures, particularly the polarized ideologies that promote violence and hinder resolution.

Heaney not only questions the morality of Nationalist and Unionist paramilitary organizations and their acts of violence but also highlights their mutually antagonistic

relationship within the framework of a fractured society. As Duncan Morrow argues, while reconciliation is "most necessary", it is also "most difficult" because "not only does it qualify the doctrine of self-determination within liberalism, but it imposes unusual risks of trust on people who have suffered directly at the hands of violence and exclusion" (7). The tension between the state's law and the individual's conscience, between order and resistance, is portrayed in one of the most potent *agōn* exchanges in *The Burial*: Creon accosts Antigone with reference to her disobedience to the state's decree. Her nonconformity amounts to something that is not only illegal but, according to Creon, immoral. To him, state authority is equal to moral authority:

> Creon: You there, studying the ground: hold up your head
> And tell us: is this true?
> Antigone: True, I admit it.
> Creon: Tell me
> And be quick about it: did you or did you not
> Know that the proclamation forbade all this?
> Antigone: I did know. How could I not? Didn't everybody?
> Creon: And still you dared to disobey the law.
> Antigone: I disobeyed because the law was not
> The law of Zeus nor the law ordained
> By Justice, Justice dwelling deep
> Among the gods of the dead. What they decree
> Is immemorial and binding for us all. (28-29)

In this authoritarian context, beyond feminist readings proposed by scholars like Judith Butler and Helen Foley, or the debate between man-made law and divine law, we witness a grave moral tragedy in the conflict between opposing pairs, another employment of the *agōn*. The opening scene introduces us to the central moral stance of the tragic heroine, as she refuses to obey a rule that goes against the proper treatment of the dead. This exchange demonstrates both sides' extreme positions and the strained prospects of peace. When Creon stops the burial of Polyneices and Antigone refuses to step back from honoring her brother, regardless of the odds, they reflect, respectively, the inflexibility and moral absolutism of the nationalist and unionist organizations and individuals during the Troubles, each declining to compromise their values. This standoff, embodied in the *agōn* between Creon and Antigone, is not simply a clash of legal authority and familial duty; it is also laden with fundamental religious and national beliefs that inform both characters' moral individuality.

As the play unfolds, Heaney skillfully weaves questions of nationalism and religious devotion within the moral fabric of the play. Both Creon and Antigone resort to Zeus, but the latter conjures Hades—guardian of burial rites—with a more urgent and immediate connection to justice: "Justice dwelling deep/Among the gods of the dead". The tensions of the play reflect into the sectarian setting of Northern Irish politics, where religious identities are interwoven with nationalist ones. According to Richard Kearney, "Those who consider the link between nation and religion to be

now no more than an anachronism need only look to the continuing sectarianism in Ulster" (6). While Protestants and Catholics are both Christians, their conflict is rooted not simply in theology but in divergent political allegiances: unionist loyalty to the UK and nationalist quest for a united Ireland have compounded their moral and institutional division.

Ultimately, in *The Burial*, Heaney renews the ethical force of Antigone by nesting moral dilemmas within the post-conflict soil of Northern Ireland, thus resisting moral simplicity by exposing the bitter absolutism on both sides of the political divide. Heaney thus weaves the ancient quarrel between divine and civil law with Northern Ireland's fractured society. Language, tone, and moral dilemmas present a powerful meditation on state legitimacy, resistance, and authority. The play serves as both an artistic intervention into historical injustice paradigms and as a performative and dialogic act that stages and challenges the unstable ethical foundations of post-conflict governance. Thus, Heaney not only adapts Sophocles' works, but he also carries forward the tradition of tragedy—to mirror, subvert, and humanize the costs of strict political conviction.

Conclusion

Heaney's theatrical versions of Greek tragedy not only draw upon the political and historical strife of Northern Ireland but also offer a means for exploring familiar themes of suffering, endurance, and resolution. *The Cure* embodies this exploration, whereas characters, scarred by torment as they are, may ultimately achieve personal and societal transformation through suffering. Philoctetes' survival—absolved from exile—becomes a metaphor not only for personal healing but also for the kind of societal transformation Heaney hoped might be possible for Northern Ireland: one constituted of resilience and the tentative promise of hope, even in the absence of a formal peace. Nevertheless, as the final line of *The Cure* reminds us, such healing remains imperfect: "the half-true rhyme is love" is a modest, fragile hope that, though incomplete, offers the only real path forward. Furthermore, Heaney's complementary portrayals of Antigone and Creon prompt audiences to reflect on the painful yet hopeful prospects of recovery with regard to historical divisions. In *The Burial*, the severe moral struggles of law, conscience, and family obligation are juxtaposed with the equally charged political and social landscape of the community. Through these adaptations, Heaney entreats his audience to grapple with the consequences of violence and division while offering possibilities of hope, rooted in the resilience of the human spirit. By adapting Greek tragedies as reflections of sorrow, fragile peace, and moral dilemmas, Heaney moves beyond the Irish context to engage with universal questions of moral authority, political legitimacy, and the meaning of healing.

This essay has traced Heaney's transpositions of Greek tragedy into his body of works, focusing on the political concerns he addresses and the moral power he probes. By employing postcolonial and adaptation theories to Heaney's plays, I have argued that these reinterpretations do not stand simply as dispassionate renderings of ancient tales but rather confront and interact with contemporary concerns in

a positive manner. Thus, it expands the scholarship on Heaney in that it shows him as a political playwright, employing the ancient forms to critique and refract events contemporaneous to him. Heaney's reworkings of Sophocles do not provide a roadmap to peace, nor do they offer political solutions. Instead, they dramatize the *agōn* of moral responsibility in fractured societies. His plays remain powerful not because they resolve conflict, but because they highlight the emotional and institutional weight it carries.

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