
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Wound Made Local: Seamus Heaney's 'Irishification' of Myth in *The Cure at Troy*

Tianqi Wang

Southwest Jiaotong University, School of Foreign Languages, Chengdu, China

Corresponding Author: Tianqi Wang, **E-mail:** 56363611@qq.com

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into *The Cure at Troy*, a dramatic work by Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, which is a modern adaptation of *Philoctetes* by the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles. From the perspective of adaptation, this study meticulously analyzes how Heaney, through his adaptive practice, reconstructed the original work's fundamental structure, character portrayals, and themes. The article aims to reveal Heaney's motivations for adaptation, the techniques and strategies employed, and to evaluate its impact on contemporary literature. Heaney's adaptation is not merely a literary innovation but also embodies profound political significance. Firstly, his adaptation carries clear political intent; secondly, he employed diverse adaptive methods, boldly reshaping and innovating the plot and dramatic structure; finally, Heaney's adaptation strategies offer significant reference and inspiration for subsequent Irish writers dealing with Greek tragedy.

KEYWORDS

Seamus Heaney; *Philoctetes*; *The Cure at Troy*; Adaptation Strategies

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the Irish theatrical world has witnessed a surge in adaptations, especially modern reinterpretations based on Greek tragedies, which have become an important avenue for playwrights to express political, social, and personal concerns. This process of adaptation, for a writer like Heaney, was a profound act of cultural intervention. It involved, as Michael Parker argues, "moments and extended passages where Heaney takes greatest pains to make the source text his own, to settle in and 'colonize' it" (Parker, 2016, p. 2.). In this context, these ancient texts become poetic weapons and tools for discourse. In 1990, Irish poet and playwright Seamus Heaney introduced his adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (hereafter *Phil.*)—*The Cure at Troy* (hereafter *Cure*)—to the public. This work not only gained literary acclaim but also had a profound impact in the political sphere, with lines from the play being frequently quoted by political leaders. In November 1990, then-Irish President Mary Robinson, in her inaugural address, quoted a line from the play:

History says, Don't hope / On this side of the grave. / But then,
once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise
up, / And hope and history rhyme. (Heaney, 1990, p.77)

Five years later, then-U.S. President Bill Clinton quoted the same lines during his first visit to Ireland, bringing American influence to the Northern Ireland peace process. Coincidentally, in the same year, Jacques Santer, then-President of the European Commission, used the same lines at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin to express his vision that "history and hope can rhyme in Ireland." Shortly after his visit, the forum's chair, Judge Catherine McGuinness, wrote in *The Irish Times*: "These lines could serve as the forum's motto." (Denard, 2000).

At that time, Heaney had not yet received the Nobel Prize in Literature, but few dramatic texts had achieved the significant status of *Cure* in modern Irish politics, highlighting the success and value of his adaptation and Irishification of the original text.

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However, Heaney's adaptation of *Cure* has not yet received sufficient attention from scholars domestically or internationally. Currently, only domestic scholars focus on translation phenomena in *Cure*, while international scholars pay more attention to themes in *Cure* such as politics and ethics, reality and justice, individuality and psychology, its impact on the Northern Ireland peace process, and the influence of Owen's and W. B. Yeats's poetry on *Cure*. However, this existing body of research has not fully articulated the mechanics of Heaney's adaptive process itself. This paper aims to fill that gap by arguing that Heaney's primary adaptive strategy is a profound act of 'Irishification'—a multifaceted process of thematic, formal, and linguistic translation that makes the ancient Greek myth speak directly to the political and psychological wounds of late 20th-century Ireland.

2. Reshaping of Content and Motivation: Philoctetes as an Allegory for the Afflicted Irish Polis

The decision by Seamus Heaney to adapt Sophocles' *Philoctetes* into *The Cure at Troy* was not an arbitrary act of literary engagement but a deeply considered response to the specific socio-political exigencies of late 20th-century Ireland, particularly the protracted and agonizing conflict in Northern Ireland, colloquially known as "The Troubles." Since the partition of Ireland in 1921, the six counties constituting Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom, a political arrangement that, from its inception, sowed the seeds of discord and became a crucible for concentrated, often violent, conflict. The period from 1968 to 1998 witnessed this discord erupt into a sustained campaign of sectarian violence, paramilitary warfare, and state repression, a conflict fundamentally rooted in deeply entrenched cultural differences, competing national allegiances, and profound disputes over identity between the predominantly Protestant Unionist community and the largely Catholic Nationalist community. Within this charged atmosphere, where art was often seen as either a refuge from or a participant in the struggle, Sophocles' ancient tragedy offered Heaney a surprisingly resonant framework for exploring pathways out of the seemingly intractable political morass.

Heaney's attraction to *Philoctetes* was far from coincidental; the predicament of the play's eponymous hero—a warrior abandoned on the desolate island of Lemnos, afflicted by a suppurating, malodorous, and divinely inflicted wound, yet possessing the indispensable bow of Heracles, crucial for Greek victory at Troy—presented a potent and multivalent allegory for Ireland's historical suffering and, more specifically, the festering wounds of Northern Ireland. This recalibrated portrayal, charged with a profound sense of injustice, fills him with an almost intractable distrust towards the Greeks who arrive to solicit his return. His suffering is two-fold. As Parker describes it, "As if the continuing agony that caused were not bad enough, the callousness and injustice of fellow-countrymen acts as an additional, gnawing source of pain for Philoctetes" (Parker, 2016, p. 4). Philoctetes, in his isolation, bitterness, and physical agony, could be seen as a microcosm of a traumatized national psyche, a land scarred by centuries of colonial history, famine, emigration, and internal division. This perceptive comment underscores Heaney's transformative intent: to see in the figure of the suffering outcast not merely a symbol of past grievance, but also a repository of potential agency and a catalyst for future hope, particularly for a Northern Ireland desperately seeking a narrative of healing.

The very core of Heaney's modifications and reshaping of Sophocles' content is driven by this profound, almost spiritual, yearning for reconciliation and the assuaging of historical wounds. His motivation was not simply to update a classic but to imbue it with a contemporary urgency, to make it speak directly to its modern-day ramifications. This "possibility of fusion" suggests a move beyond entrenched binaries, a hope for a new synthesis that could transcend the zero-sum logic of sectarian strife. While the temporal and geographical distance between ancient Greek tragedy and the contemporary political realities of Northern Ireland is undeniable, Heaney masterfully bridges this gap. He employs the myth of Philoctetes and the broader narrative of the Trojan War to establish a rich tapestry of symbolic parallels with Irish history, particularly the cycles of betrayal, suffering, and the elusive quest for justice and peace that characterized The Troubles. Heaney utilizes Sophocles' foundational text as a robust framework, upon which he performs what can be described as surgically precise micro-adjustments to plot dynamics, character motivations, and, crucially, linguistic register. These interventions endow the classical work with an acute modern significance, making it a powerful lens through which to refract and understand the complex conflicts experienced by the people of Northern Ireland. A key strategic decision in Heaney's adaptation is the subtle yet profound re-characterization of the principal figures, moving them beyond the archetypal roles they occupy in Sophocles' Hellenic value system, which emphasizes heroism, honor, and the inexorable hand of fate. While Heaney retains these classical underpinnings, he endows his characters with significantly greater psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and a recognizably modern sensibility, thereby reflecting the nuanced and often contradictory motivations of political actors and ordinary individuals caught within the maelstrom of the Northern Ireland conflict. Most notably, Heaney elevates Philoctetes from a somewhat peripheral, albeit symbolically crucial, figure in the Sophoclean ensemble to the undeniable dramatic and ethical center of *The Cure at Troy*. In Sophocles, Philoctetes is primarily a pitiable tragic hero, a Greek warrior whose agonizing wound and resultant stench lead to his abandonment. His initial plea to Neoptolemus is one of raw, desperate pathos: "To a fellow countryman, a man pitiable, lonely,

reviled, desperate, friendless, show compassion. If you feel any kindness, speak to me. Answer me." (Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, lines 225-228).

Heaney's *Philoctetes*, while still bearing the marks of that same profound injury and abandonment, is imbued with a heightened sense of self-esteem, a steely stubbornness born of betrayal, and a palpable anger. His first significant utterance to Neoptolemus in *The Cure at Troy* (p. 15) immediately establishes this shift: "I know I look like a wild animal, / But don't let that scare you. / Don't treat me Like an untouchable./ What I am Is what I was made into by the traitors." This *Philoctetes* is less a figure of pure lamentation and more one of righteous indignation. The "betrayers" – Odysseus and others – are explicitly invoked, and his condition is framed not merely as a divine affliction but as a consequence of human perfidy. This recalibrated portrayal, charged with a profound sense of injustice, fills him with an almost intractable distrust towards the Greeks who arrive to solicit his return, and his indispensable bow, to the Trojan War. As Marianne McDonald (1996) and later Parker (2017) have noted, the physical wound, however horrific, is compounded by the psychological wound of abandonment and betrayal. This carefully constructed characterization allows Heaney's *Philoctetes* to become a powerful allegorical representative for those marginalized, embittered, and traumatized communities within Northern Ireland – on both sides of the sectarian divide – who felt betrayed by political establishments and deeply scarred by the ongoing violence. His suffering is both individual and symbolic of a wider societal malady.

Furthermore, Heaney retains *Philoctetes*' core status as an abandoned, wounded warrior but recasts him less as a passive victim of divine caprice and more as a complex anti-hero, grappling with doubt, nursing a desire for revenge, yet ultimately capable of seeking and offering a form of redemption. His questioning of divine justice is more pointed and existential than in some readings of the original, resonating with a modern, perhaps post-Holocaust, skepticism: "The gods do grant immunity, you see,/ To everybody except the true and the just. / The more of a plague you are, and the crueller,/...How am I to keep on praising gods" (*Cure*, p. 25). This theological doubt, coupled with his acute insight into human fallibility, especially evident in his complex relationship with Neoptolemus, transcends the often clearer moral dichotomies of the Sophoclean original. When *Philoctetes* accuses Odysseus of corrupting Neoptolemus

And now you're going to take my second self. This boy. He's your
accomplice but he was my friend. With you he does what he is
told, with me he did what his nature told him. I made him free, you
only fouled him up. (Heaney, 1990, p. 56)

he articulates a profound understanding of moral compromise and the fragility of innocence. Heaney's *Philoctetes* is thus rendered more psychologically nuanced, allowing contemporary audiences to empathize more deeply with his multifaceted challenges and profound moral dilemmas, dilemmas that mirrored those faced by individuals navigating the treacherous ethical landscapes of Northern Ireland.

The supporting characters, Neoptolemus and Odysseus, are similarly invested with a greater degree of moral complexity. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, is presented as a young man caught between his innate sense of honor and the pragmatic, deceitful instructions of Odysseus. He struggles with the task of tricking *Philoctetes* but is ultimately swayed by duty and ambition. Heaney amplifies this internal conflict. His Neoptolemus is more palpably torn, his moral struggle between loyalty to the Greek cause (and the persuasive rhetoric of Odysseus) and his burgeoning empathy for the suffering *Philoctetes* is rendered with acute psychological realism. Heaney delves deeper into the young warrior's ethical education, highlighting the painful process of moral growth that occurs through his interaction with the wronged hero. This portrayal makes Neoptolemus a figure through whom the audience can explore the difficult choices faced by a younger generation in Ireland, a generation inheriting a conflict not of their making but whose actions could shape its resolution.

Odysseus, the master strategist in Sophocles, often viewed as the epitome of cunning pragmatism, retains this intellectual sharpness in Heaney's adaptation. However, Heaney subtly infuses his portrayal with an undercurrent of weariness and perhaps even a flicker of remorse, thereby complicating the traditional view of him as an unalloyed Machiavellian figure. While still a leader prepared to employ morally dubious means for what he perceives as the greater good of the Greek campaign, Heaney's Odysseus hints at the psychological toll of such realpolitik. For example, his justification for deception, while firm, carries a weight that suggests an awareness of its ethical cost. This nuanced depiction of figures like Neoptolemus and Odysseus serves to illuminate the pervasive "gray areas" of moral decision-making, particularly in times of protracted conflict, and underscores the profound difficulty of discerning and pursuing an ethically sound path when faced with competing loyalties and imperatives. Through these detailed and empathetic characterizations, Heaney powerfully demonstrates that even within environments saturated by political calculation, historical enmity, and cycles of deception, the potential for sincerity, compassion, and moral awakening endures, thereby subtly opening a space for the "hope" of reconciliation and the eventual "cure" that the play's title anticipates.

In essence, by strategically reimagining the motivations, psychological landscapes, and ethical quandaries of Sophocles' core characters, and by subtly recalibrating the plot's emphasis, Seamus Heaney crafts figures that resonate powerfully as allegories for the human condition within the specific crucible of Northern Ireland. His transformative approach to the classical text allows it not merely to reflect but to actively interrogate contemporary realities, exploring the moral predicaments born of sectarian hostility and violence, and, crucially, gesturing towards the arduous but necessary possibility of healing and societal reconciliation.

3. Formal Reconfiguration and Innovation: Re-voicing Tragedy for a Wounded Land

Beyond the significant reshaping of character and thematic motivation, Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* enacts a series of profound formal reconfigurations and innovations upon its Sophoclean antecedent, *Philoctetes*. While the broad narrative trajectory of the original is largely preserved – the mission to retrieve Philoctetes and his bow from Lemnos – Heaney radically alters the dramatic structure, linguistic texture, and, most notably, the function and voice of the Chorus. These formal interventions are not mere aesthetic flourishes but are integral to his project of "Irishifying" the classical text, imbuing it with a contemporary resonance that speaks directly to the socio-political wounds of Northern Ireland and the yearning for societal healing.

The most immediate formal alteration is Heaney's decision to retitle Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as *The Cure at Troy*. This titular shift is far more than a simple lexical substitution; it functions as a crucial hermeneutic key, signaling a fundamental thematic reorientation from individual suffering and isolation to the possibility of collective healing and societal reconciliation. The name "Philoctetes," while evocative for classicists, might remain opaque to a broader contemporary audience. "*The Cure at Troy*," however, immediately foregrounds the telos of healing and resolution, a "cure" not just for Philoctetes' physical wound, but by allegorical extension, for the "wound" of Troy (representing a state of protracted conflict and societal breakdown) and, most pressingly for Heaney's immediate context, the festering wound of sectarian division in Northern Ireland. The "miraculous healing" to which Heaney refers taps into a deep cultural substratum in Ireland, a land where religious faith and folk traditions have often intertwined with hopes for deliverance from hardship. By invoking this, Heaney subtly positions his play within a familiar cultural lexicon, making its central concern – the arduous journey towards societal repair – immediately accessible and deeply resonant. The title, therefore, functions as a paratextual signpost, directing the audience's interpretative framework towards themes of recovery, reconciliation, and the possibility of a future transcending past enmities. It shifts the emphasis from the pathology of the wound (as central to *Philoctetes*) to the therapeutic potential of the dramatic encounter itself. Further framing the audience's engagement with the play is Heaney's choice of an epigraph from W. H. Auden's poem "As I Walked Out One Evening" (1964):

O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.
O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart. (Auden, 1964, p. 85)

This carefully selected quotation serves multiple functions, intricately weaving a pre-emptive layer of meaning around the ensuing drama. Firstly, it establishes a tone of profound introspection and self-examination. The injunction to "look in the mirror... in your distress" acts as an invitation for the audience, particularly an Irish audience deeply mired in the distress of The Troubles, to confront their own reflections, their own complicities, and their own pain. *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney implies, will itself function as such a mirror, reflecting the unpalatable truths of a divided society.

Secondly, Auden's lines directly address the challenging ethics of reconciliation. The paradoxical assertion that "Life remains a blessing / Although you cannot bless" speaks to the endurance of hope and the intrinsic value of existence even amidst profound suffering and the inability to offer benediction due to bitterness or trauma. More pointedly, the final two lines – "You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart" – encapsulate the immense difficulty, yet moral imperative, of forging human connection across divides marked by historical antagonism and mutual suspicion. The "crooked neighbour" is a stark acknowledgment of the imperfections and perhaps even malevolence perceived in the "other side," while the "crooked heart" recognizes the flawed and wounded nature of the self attempting this act of love or reconciliation. This is not a sentimental call for easy forgiveness but a clear-eyed recognition of the compromised, damaged state from which any genuine attempt at healing must begin. The Auden epigraph, therefore, primes the audience for a drama that will not shy away from the complexities of human failing and the arduous, imperfect nature of any potential "cure." It subtly introduces a Christian ethic of

neighborly love, but one tempered by a profound realism about the "crookedness" inherent in both the giver and receiver of such love in a conflict-ridden society.

While Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is, of course, a poetic drama composed in Greek iambic trimeter and lyrical choral odes, Heaney's choice to render his adaptation in a distinctly modern, unrhymed poetic idiom, heavily infused with Hiberno-English vernacular, represents a significant formal innovation with profound decolonial implications. As a poet renowned for his deep attunement to the rhythms of ordinary speech and the resonance of local dialect, Heaney brought his full poetic arsenal to the task of adaptation. Heaney, however, localizes this "eternal and universal" by grounding it in a specifically Irish linguistic soil. Heaney, who acknowledged receiving classical advice from figures like Derek Walcott during his time at Harvard, moved beyond a standard English translation to create a linguistic texture that is palpably Irish. This involved the strategic incorporation of Hiberno-English vocabulary – words like "slabbering" (incessant, messy talk), "canny" (shrewd, careful), "hagged" (roughly cut, from Irish *hag* meaning to chop), "clouts" (blows, or pieces of cloth), "blather" (foolish talk), "wheesht" (be quiet, from Irish *éist*), and "shilly-shallying" (indecisiveness). These are not mere decorative additions; they imbue the dialogue with an authenticity and immediacy for an Irish audience, and for others, they signal a distinct cultural voice.

Furthermore, Heaney incorporates syntactic structures characteristic of Hiberno-English, such as the use of the present tense to narrate past events, or idiomatic expressions like "is his head away?" (is he mad?) and "that put me wild" (that made me furious). In short, as McDonald simply states before providing her own example, "The language of Ireland is apparent" (McDonald, 1996, p. 134). These linguistic features, as scholars of Hiberno-English like Kiberd (1995) have argued, often carry traces of Gaelic syntax and worldview, subtly "othering" the standard English frame. By skillfully weaving Irish dialect and thought patterns into the English of the play, Heaney achieves several effects: he brings the classical narrative closer to the lived experience and linguistic reality of his primary audience; he infuses the text with local color, vitality, and a unique sonic landscape; and, crucially, he performs an act of linguistic decolonization. This vernacularization makes the characters' emotional expressions feel more direct, raw, and sincere, enhancing the play's overall affective impact and resonance. Perhaps Heaney's most radical and critically acclaimed formal innovation in *The Cure at Troy* is his profound reimagining and expansion of the role and voice of the Chorus. In Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the Chorus is comprised of Neoptolemus's sailors; they offer sympathy to Philoctetes, express anxiety about their mission, and generally function within the conventional bounds of the Greek tragic chorus – providing commentary, reflecting on the action, and mediating between characters and audience, albeit from a specific partisan perspective (Neoptolemus's crew). Heaney, however, transforms the Chorus into a far more complex, pivotal, and overtly politicized entity.

Significantly, unlike Sophocles' play which opens with Odysseus and Neoptolemus arriving on Lemnos, Heaney's *Cure* begins with a completely original, thirty-two-line prologue delivered by a Chorus of three women. As McDonald points out, this formal change has an immediate political function: "The most obvious insertions are those by the chorus at the beginning and the end of the play, and this places us in the middle of the Irish problem" (McDonald, 1996, p. 131). These figures, "draped in shawls" and speaking "directly and frankly to the audience" (Heaney, 1990, stage directions, p. 1), immediately establish a different theatrical contract. Their demeanor is less that of involved participants and more akin to that of mythic arbiters or even an embodiment of a communal conscience, reminiscent of the Norns or Fates from other mythological traditions, but firmly rooted in an Irish visual and oral sensibility. Their opening lines are stark and arresting:

PHILOCTETES.
HERCULES.
ODYSSEUS.
Heroes. Victims.
Gods and human beings.
All throwing shapes,
Every one of them
Convinced he's in the right,
All of them glad
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
No matter what. (Heaney, 1990, p. 1)

This catalogue of names immediately introduces the key players, but the swift re-categorization from "Heroes" to "Victims" signals the play's thematic concern with suffering and the complex, often blurred, lines between agency and victimage. The Chorus does not offer a traditional exposition of the plot but launches directly into a trenchant critique of human nature – its arrogance, stubbornness, deceit, folly, narcissism, and propensity for self-deception and cyclical error. These are universal human failings, yet in the context of Northern Ireland, these lines resonated with an almost unbearable acuity, seeming to describe the very psychological and behavioral patterns that perpetuated The Troubles. The Chorus, from this very first moment, functions as

a moral compass, explicitly reminding the audience of the ethical and philosophical questions that will underpin the ensuing drama.

Throughout the play, Heaney's Chorus maintains a far more active and ambivalent role than its Sophoclean counterpart. They are not simply Neoptolemus's retinue. At times, they express profound empathy for Philoctetes' suffering and his justifiable rage. At other times, however, they articulate a pragmatic understanding of political necessity, urging Neoptolemus to adhere to Odysseus's plan or reminding Philoctetes of the divine prophecies that mandate his participation in the Trojan War. This internal tension within the Chorus mirrors the conflicting pressures and loyalties experienced by ordinary people caught in the midst of political conflict. In this sense, the Chorus becomes the voice of the polis, but a specifically Irish polis, burdened by history yet yearning for resolution. They represent the collective consciousness, the repository of communal memory, wisdom, and often, profound weariness with the cycles of violence. This expansion of the Chorus's role is a revolutionary structural intervention. It enriches the play's narrative layers, allowing for a more direct engagement with contemporary political realities and providing a powerful, resonant channel for Heaney's overarching message of peace, justice, and the arduous path towards healing. The Chorus's most famous and politically impactful intervention occurs towards the play's end, just before the *deus ex machina* appearance of Heracles. It is here that Heaney inserts lines that directly and poignantly evoke the suffering of The Troubles: The hunger-striker's father/stands in the graveyard dumb./The police widow in veils/faints at the funeral home. (Cure, p. 77) These specific, contemporary Irish images – the silent grief of a hunger striker's father, the collapsing police widow – momentarily shatter the classical frame, bringing the full weight of immediate, local suffering onto the stage. It is through these lines, spoken by the Chorus, that Heaney reveals the ultimate "intention" behind his use of the Philoctetes myth: to find a dramatic language and form capable of bearing witness to and potentially transcending such contemporary anguish.

Finally, in a significant departure from Sophocles where Heracles appears as himself, Heaney designates a member of the Chorus to speak as Heracles, mediating between the divine and mortal realms and articulating the imperative for change and the possibility of a future where "hope and history rhyme" (Cure, p. 77). The Chorus, having earlier lamented the seemingly endless cycles of violence and retribution, now becomes the conduit for this transcendent, optimistic vision. Their final lines, a direct address to both the characters on stage and the audience, encapsulate the play's ultimate, albeit hard-won, affirmation: Believe that a further shore/Is reachable from here./Believe in miracles/And cures and healing wells. (Cure, p. 77)

Through these multifaceted formal reconfigurations – the titular shift, the resonant epigraph, the creation of a hybrid poetic-vernacular language, and, most profoundly, the transformation of the Chorus – Heaney not only adapts a Greek tragedy but crafts a new dramatic entity, one that is formally innovative and thematically tailored to address the deep wounds and tentative hopes of his own time and place.

4. The Enduring Value and Resonant Impact of "Irishified" Adaptation Strategies: Heaney's Legacy in Contemporary Irish Drama

The practice of literary adaptation, far from being a derivative or secondary act of creation, is, as Linda Hutcheon (2006) compellingly argues in *A Theory of Adaptation*, a dynamic process of "repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7). The "journey" of a source text across national, temporal, and linguistic boundaries creates, in Hutcheon's terms, "interstices"—liminal spaces where adaptors can inject new perspectives, pose urgent contemporary questions, and thereby shift the audience's engagement from a reverential focus on the "original" to an active interpretation of the "new" work. This inherent fluidity of the adaptive process, particularly in drama which thrives on iteration and reinterpretation (Qi Yaping, 2023), allows adaptors to explore what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) might term a "Third Space." Within this conceptual space, classical texts can be endowed with new cultural connotations, ensuring their continued relevance and enabling their survival and expansion through cross-cultural transmission. Seamus Heaney's "Irishification" of Greek tragedy in *The Cure at Troy* exemplifies this process, not only revitalizing a classical text but also forging a potent strategy with significant value and enduring impact on subsequent Irish drama.

The turn towards Greek tragedy by Irish playwrights, particularly during and after the intense sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, was not accidental. Its perceived "eternal truths" and its canonical status within Western culture provided a degree of authoritative distance. For a culture like Ireland's, acutely aware of its colonial past and often grappling with what were perceived as "primitive" or atavistic sectarian impulses, the structured rationalism and philosophical depth of Greek tragedy held a particular attraction. Adaptors could utilize these ancient narratives as political allegories, transposing contemporary Irish social and political dilemmas onto the tragic framework. This process allowed for a critical examination of Irish realities through the leveraging of cultural difference and intertextual resonance, transforming adaptation into a powerful medium for self-expression and social critique. As Marianne McDonald (1996, p. 129) trenchantly observes, "As part of the colonial policy the Irish were often construed as barbarians, but now they take the works of civilisation and as a civilised people themselves are using them to

express their aspirations. The classics become poetic weapons and tools for discourse: microphones for the new dialogues." By appropriating and re-voicing these foundational texts of the Western canon, Irish playwrights could subtly challenge colonial cultural legacies and assert a distinct, contemporary Irish perspective.

This tradition of "Irishifying" classical texts has deep roots. Since W. B. Yeats's groundbreaking retranslations and adaptations of Sophocles' *King Oedipus* (1926) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (1927) for the Abbey Theatre stage, 20th and 21st-century Irish playwrights have consistently turned to the classics. They have utilized the "interstices" created by such adaptations to interpret and stage themes – often relating to political violence, historical trauma, contested sovereignty, and fractured identity – that might have been too raw or too politically sensitive to address directly in a purely contemporary realist mode. The classical frame provided both a degree of aesthetic distance and a universalizing resonance, allowing for a more profound and less polemical engagement with contentious local issues.

Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* stands as a pivotal new chapter within this rich Irish tradition of classical adaptation and rewriting. Building upon the legacy of predecessors like Yeats, Heaney reconstructs both the content and the formal structures of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* to create what can be seen as a "window of profound allegorical significance" (a concept echoed by various critics of Irish adaptations). Through this re-envisioned classical lens, Heaney delves into the complex intersections of Irish history, memory, and the longing for modernity and peace. His modern interpretations of ancient mythic figures and their tragic dilemmas serve not only to highlight universal human themes of suffering, betrayal, and the arduous path to reconciliation but also to ground these universals in the specific, palpable realities of the Irish experience.

The profound value of Heaney's adaptation strategy lies in this dialectical ability to simultaneously localize the universal and universalize the local. His characters, while retaining their classical names and narrative functions, speak with Irish cadences and grapple with dilemmas that resonate deeply with the Northern Ireland conflict (as explored in Sections I and II). This capacity for what might be termed a "trans-historical dialogue" does more than simply enrich the repertoire of Irish drama; it provides a compelling model for artistic creation that seeks to intimately integrate the classical with the contemporary, the personal with the political, and the aesthetic with the social. Through *The Cure at Troy*, Heaney powerfully demonstrates that ancient Greek narratives, far from being dusty museum pieces, can serve as exceptionally effective and ethically charged mediums for dissecting complex contemporary political issues, particularly the psychological and societal wounds inflicted by protracted conflict.

The impact of Heaney's approach in *The Cure at Troy* extends far beyond the play's own considerable success and political resonance. By so masterfully using Sophocles' story to reflect and interrogate Irish reality, he arguably reinvigorated and gave new impetus to the practice of classical adaptation among a subsequent generation of Irish playwrights, encouraging them to delve even more deeply into local social issues and to experiment further with form and language.

The value of Heaney's adaptation strategies, therefore, lies not only in the intrinsic artistic merit and cultural impact of *The Cure at Troy* itself but also in its catalytic role. Heaney did more than just provide a model for technical borrowing (such as the use of vernacular or the re-functioning of the Chorus); he re-energized a mode of cultural dialogue. He demonstrated how Irish artists could engage with the foundational texts of the Western canon not as subservient imitators but as confident, critical interlocutors, capable of transforming those texts to speak to their own unique historical and cultural predicaments.

In summary, Heaney's "Irishified" adaptation strategies, so powerfully embodied in *The Cure at Troy*, have left an indelible mark on the landscape of contemporary Irish drama. His work has been inherited, interrogated, and developed by a new generation of playwrights like Marina Carr and Frank McGuinness. A comparative lens on these works reveals that Heaney's influence transcends mere stylistic or technical imitation. More profoundly, he initiated and legitimized a potent form of cultural conversation, one that empowers Irish artists to appropriate, re-voice, and ultimately re-possess classical narratives, thereby promoting the practice of adaptation on both Irish and international theatrical stages towards ever deeper, more diverse, and critically engaged domains. Heaney's example has underscored the enduring capacity of ancient stories, when re-imagined with courage and artistic integrity, to illuminate the darkest corners of contemporary experience and to articulate the persistent human hope for a "cure."

5. Conclusion

The art of adaptation, as masterfully demonstrated by Seamus Heaney in *The Cure at Troy*, represents far more than a sophisticated technical exercise in transposing an ancient text into a modern idiom. It stands as a profound act of cultural intervention, a testament to the enduring power of classical tragedy to illuminate contemporary human experience, and a deeply resonant poetic exploration of Ireland's historical wounds and its arduous, often tentative, journey towards healing and reconciliation. Heaney's genius lies in his ability to skillfully "translate" not just the words but the very soul of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, grafting its ancient narrative of suffering, betrayal, and the quest for justice onto the bruised and

contested soil of late 20th-century Northern Ireland. Through the meticulously re-voiced Chorus, the nuanced re-characterizations, and the infusion of a distinctly Irish linguistic sensibility, Heaney allows the distant echoes of Greek myth to resonate with the immediate, palpable anguish of his own time, directly addressing the societal pain points and thereby showcasing the profound political allegory and deep humanistic concern that can be achieved through the adaptive process. *The Cure at Troy* thus serves as a vivid and compelling exemplar of how literary art, particularly the re-imagined classical drama, can function as a catalyst for social therapy and a vehicle for articulating aspirations for societal progress.

Heaney's adaptation strategies, as explored in this study, significantly transcend the parameters of simple textual transposition or mere modernization. He does not simply update the setting or language but creatively reconstructs a trans-historical and trans-cultural dialogic bridge. This bridge allows the potent themes and ethical dilemmas of Sophocles' original to speak with renewed urgency to contemporary audiences, transforming the classical text into a living, breathing "source of water" (to borrow an image from Heaney's own poetic lexicon) for discussing and grappling with the intractable social and political issues of his day. Through this dynamic process of "Irishification"—marked by thematic reorientation, formal innovation, and linguistic hybridization—Heaney not only breathes new life into an ancient Greek tragedy, enabling it to function as an allegorical mirror reflecting the complex contradictions of Irish society and its often-painful pursuit of peace and reconciliation, but also carves out new, fertile pathways for Irish drama itself. He demonstrates a mode of artistic engagement that allows for the deep and meaningful integration of the classical with the contemporary, the personal with the political, and the aesthetic with the ethical. Ultimately, Heaney's achievement is profound. In McDonald's words, "Heaney has done what we want done with the classics: his talent as a great modern poet merges with a great poet from the past. Heaney translates for moderns in a way that invigorates the ancient text and makes it relevant besides accessible" (McDonald, 1996, p. 139).

This profound fusion is manifested not merely in the modernization of thematic concerns—such as the nature of justice, the burden of history, or the ethics of political action—but more significantly in the meticulous reshaping of narrative structures, particularly the innovative deployment of the Chorus, and the subtle yet powerful re-imagining of character psychologies. These strategies, as has been shown, did not exist in a vacuum. They resonated powerfully within the Irish literary tradition, inspiring and influencing subsequent generations of playwrights. Figures like Marina Carr and Frank McGuinness, among others, have continued to explore and expand upon the adaptive methodologies exemplified by Heaney, using classical frameworks to dissect the intricacies of Irish identity, to confront historical traumas, and to probe the complexities of contemporary Irish life. Heaney's work, therefore, has played a crucial role in fostering and sustaining a vibrant and critically engaged tradition of classical adaptation in Ireland, a tradition that continues to produce some of the most compelling and thought-provoking drama on the global stage.

Ultimately, Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* stands as a landmark achievement in the art of adaptation. It is a work that powerfully affirms the capacity of ancient narratives, when approached with poetic insight and profound human empathy, to transcend their original contexts and to speak with enduring relevance to the human condition. By making Sophocles speak with an Irish accent, by allowing the suffering of Philoctetes to echo the pain of a divided land, and by daring to articulate, through the voice of his transformed Chorus, a vision where "hope and history rhyme," Heaney not only created a theatrical masterpiece but also offered a profound meditation on the possibility of healing, the necessity of courage, and the enduring power of art to illuminate a path towards a more just and compassionate future. His "Irishified" classic serves as a lasting paradigm for how world literature and drama can be revitalized and re-voiced, ensuring that the great stories of the past continue to challenge, console, and inspire new generations.

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