

**“WHOEVER ISN’T FOR US IS AGAINST US IN THIS CASE¹”:
THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUALIZATION IN SEAMUS HEANEY’S
THE BURIAL AT THEBES**

*“Quem não concorda conosco está contra nós neste caso”²: O papel da
Contextualização na Peça *The Burial at Thebes* de Seamus Heaney*

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to discuss the issue of contextualization in Seamus Heaney’s translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, entitled *The Burial at Thebes*, in relation to the invasion of Iraq by the United States government in 2003. Such a subject served as an inspiration for the translator in the composition of his work. For the purpose of this study, specific passages in the play were selected in order to examine the lines of some of the characters in comparison to public speeches of former American President George W. Bush, as well as Bush’s decisions during his government. The treatment of prisoners in war situations during Bush’s presidency is also highlighted in the article. Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes* brings a critical viewpoint concerning contemporary matters, as the similarities regarding the subject of power abuse in both Creon’s and Bush’s governments can be attentively observed.

KEYWORDS: Irish Studies; Irish Theater; Iraq War.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é discutir a contextualização na tradução da obra *Antígona* de Sófocles por Seamus Heaney, intitulada *The Burial at Thebes*, referente à invasão do Iraque pelo governo dos Estados Unidos em 2003. Este assunto serviu de inspiração ao tradutor na composição de seu trabalho. Para atingir os objetivos deste artigo, passagens específicas da peça foram selecionadas a fim de examinar as falas de alguns dos personagens em comparação aos discursos públicos do ex-presidente americano George W. Bush e do posicionamento de sua administração. O tratamento de prisioneiros em situações de guerra durante a presidência de Bush também é destacado no artigo. A tradução de Heaney *The Burial at Thebes* traz à tona um ponto de vista crítico sobre assuntos contemporâneos, já que semelhanças relacionadas ao assunto de abuso de poder nos governos de Creon e Bush podem ser

¹ Antigone’s lines quoting Creon in *The Burial at Thebes: Sophocles’ Antigone* (HEANEY, 2005b, p.55-56).

² This translation is provided by the author of this article.

atentamente observados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Estudos Irlandeses; Teatro Irlandês; Guerra do Iraque.

Some of the political and social concerns discussed in Greek tragedies can still be relevant in contemporary times, especially when such works are revisited and reexamined, taking into account present-day circumstances. J. Michael Walton (2002, p. 35) comments on the reevaluation of Greek tragedies through the lenses of contemporary matters and attentively remarks that “any *Medea* can be an Irish *Medea*, or a Russian *Medea*; or an Italian *Medea*. All that is necessary are the social or political conditions and these myths will work their magic”. This can be observed, for instance, in Tom Paulin’s translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, as Peter McDonald (1995, p.188) remarks, while debating the significance of some Irish translations of Greek tragedies:

The attempt to develop an immediate relevance to current affairs within the texts is especially apparent in Paulin’s *Antigone*, which employs an Ulster dialect in many passages, and presents the dilemmas of the play as explicitly analogous to civil crisis in Northern Ireland. [...] In this case, a character such as Creon is made to speak sometimes in the voice of a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or one of his senior officials [...], and sometimes as a strident Ulster Unionist politician in the full flow of his not-at-inch rhetoric.

Another example, which concerns the subject of study of this article, is related to Seamus Heaney’s translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, entitled *The Burial at Thebes* (2004). Regarding the general structure of the play, Heaney’s work is not divided into acts and scenes, offering different possibilities to explore the portrayal of actions and situations in theatrical performances. It was first staged in 2004 at the Abbey Theatre in a production directed by Lorraine Pintal, according to the online archives of the Abbey Theatre website³. The title of Heaney’s translation proposes a change of focus from the character Antigone to an event in the play, in this case her polemic act of burying Polyneices, suggesting a more specific and distinctive approach to Heaney’s work. *The Burial at Thebes* was inspired by the apprehensive moments involving former American President George W. Bush’s administration’s planning and materialization of the Iraq War in 2003

³ Information available at: <www.abbeytheatre.ie>. Access on: 25 Jun. 2020.

(HEANEY, 2005a, p. 76; HARKIN, 2008, p. 303). I shall then investigate both the discourses of characters in the play and Bush's public statements, as well as his administration's decisions, in order to identify critical correspondences with contextual matters. The maltreatment of prisoners in war circumstances during Bush's presidency will also be discussed.

Prior to any discussion related to the analysis of Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, a brief remark on the relationship between context and text becomes necessary as a starting point. Rick Rylance and Judy Simons (2001, p. xv) mention the interactive aspect of literary texts in relation to different kinds of situations and contexts:

Although one common critical position has always been that what matters in reading a literary text is 'the words on the page', there has always been an opposing pressure. Literary works naturally engage with the worlds that surround them and of which they are a part. Readers too, however, engrossed by the micro-world bounded by the page, are people whose lives are enmeshed spontaneously and reflectively relate their reading. So reading literature is essentially a dynamic activity. Of itself it encourages readers to make connections between the diverse aspects of their world, including the represented worlds they find in their reading.

In addition, Rylance and Simons (2001, p. xix) expand the notion of literary context, as follows:

But the idea of literary context also entails what one recent glossary definition calls the 'other, more open-ended part of criticism [which] involves relating literary works themselves to their relevant psychological, social, and historical contexts' (Fowler, Dictionary, 41). For many contemporary critics, the idea of context has come to acquire a sense somewhat opposed to what many perceive as a narrow and confined scrutiny of verbal detail and concentration on the single text. Modern contextual studies open out the perspective and shade more towards the second dictionary definition of context, that associated with 'contexture': the mingling, and weaving of different strands. In such approaches, the individual text, or groups of texts, are understood in a wider framework, often specifically in relation to other art forms, or movements of ideas, or broader developments in the society of their times or that of their readers.

Most importantly, one characteristic of modern contextual studies is the emphasis on the process of "how works change their meanings over time as the interests of different groups and periods shape the context of their interpretation" (RYLANCE; SIMONS,

2001, p. xxii).

Antigone allows the discussion on issues that can be associated with the treatment of individuals and decisions authorized by abusive governments. Marianne McDonald (2000, p. 52) sensibly remarks that “although the play is from fifth-century Athens, the issues about human rights have everlasting relevance. This play is a human drama and a tragedy that shows the price of supporting these rights”. McDonald (2000, p. 52) also comments on the critical focus of performances of *Antigone*, as she argues that “the play is often performed as veiled criticism of an abusive government to show that something is rotten in that particular state”. Such an aspect seems to be intensively present in the text of *The Burial at Thebes*, as Heaney’s version of *Antigone* approaches the previously mentioned context of the invasion of Iraq, an event that can be strongly connected with destructive governmental decisions.

Remarkably enough, Irish adaptations of this Sophocles’ play would only emerge in the late twentieth century. Christopher Murray (1991, p. 115) registers his concern with the subject by stating that “one of the many wonders is that *Antigone* was not adapted by Irish playwrights before the 1980s”. By this time, Jean Anouilh and Bertold Brecht had already written their socially critical versions of the play⁴ (HARKIN, 2008, p. 293). Brendan Kennelly’s *Antigone*, Tom Paulin’s previously mentioned translation entitled *The Riot Act*, Pat Murphy’s film version entitled *Anne Devlin*, and Aidan Carl Matthews’ *Antigone* are versions of Sophocles’ play that appeared in the Irish scenario in 1984 (HARKIN, 2008, p. 294-295). According to Hugh Harkin (2008, p. 295), Kennelly’s and Paulin’s works can be considered “the most influential [Irish] versions from 1984”, exploring different thematic territories, that is, whereas Kennelly focused on a feminist perspective, Paulin approached political conflicts regarding Northern Ireland. In 2003, the Irish playwright Conall Morrison, similarly to Heaney, offered a version of the play that concentrates on the “events in the world at large” rather than the Irish context (HARKIN, 2008, p. 306). Morrison’s *Antigone* incorporates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into the

⁴ Philip Brandes (2015) in the online edition of *Los Angeles Times* remarks that Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* was written in 1944 during the German occupation of France, which slightly approached the theme of resistance. Bertolt Brecht’s version of the play was written in 1948 and offered a critical view of the Nazi regime (MALINA, 1990, p. v-vi). The significance of the contextual issue in Brecht’s play can be perceived in the literary and drama criticism in the 1950’s. For instance, Frank Jones and Gore Vidal (1957, p. 42) go even further in commenting on Brecht’s work, as they state that “one may think of the play as a Leninist

political issues addressed in the play (HARKIN, 2008, p. 300). Harkin (2008, p. 301-302) critically examines Morrison's work, as he argues that the Israeli figures are well identified, as Creon, for instance, can be clearly associated with Ariel Sharon, former Prime Minister of Israel, but the representation of the Palestinians remains uncertain.

As previously mentioned, Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, in connection with the atmosphere of unfairness provoked by the situations related to the invasion of Iraq, approaches such context. The renowned author published several works discussing contemporary issues such as the political struggles in Ireland. For instance, his translated publications of *Sweeney Astray: A Version from the Irish* (1984) (JOHN, 1985, p. 90) and *The Cure at Troy: After Philoctetes by Sophocles* (1990) (MCDONALD, 1996, p. 132) deal with such matter. Bearing in mind the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Heaney comments on his selection of *Antigone* among other Greek tragedies, as he states that "there was a general worldwide problem where considerations of state security posed serious threats to individual freedom and human rights. Then there was the obvious parallel between George W. Bush and Creon" (apud HARKIN, 2008, p. 303), referring to both as abusive leaders. Heaney (2005a, p. 76) goes further and complements his connections between the play and the context of the invasion of Iraq by arguing that:

Early in 2003, the situation that pertains in Sophocles' play was being reenacted in our own world. Just as Creon forced the citizens of Thebes into an either/or situation in relation to Antigone, the Bush administration in the White House was using the same tactic to forward its argument for war on Iraq. Creon puts it to the Chorus in these terms: Either you are a patriot, a loyal citizen, and regard Antigone as an enemy of the state [...] or else you yourselves are traitorous [...]. And Bush was using a similar strategy, asking, in effect: Are you in favour of state security or are you not? If you don't support the eradication of this tyrant in Iraq and the threat he poses to the free world, you are on the wrong side in "the war on terror".

Heaney then critically highlights the apparent similarities between the implausible measures taken by both leaders in order to accomplish their goals. As a translation strategy to introduce contemporary criticism and call attention to Creon's discourse in his version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Heaney makes use of specific vocabulary and expressions that are

track on imperialism, brought up to date by allusions to Hitler and his attack on the U.S.S.R.".

similar to those used by Bush. Heaney also opts to make Antigone quote Creon in certain situations, which is a strategy that reinforces the importance of Creon's influence in *The Burial at Thebes*. Other characters also make citations instead of paraphrasing information. This will be further observed in the analysis of selected passages of *The Burial at Thebes*.

After September 11, Bush's administration's actions to protect the country and combat terrorism became largely debatable. The United States government targeted Iraq as its main opponent without providing concrete reasons, and Bush's administration tirelessly pressured both the American Congress and the United Nations Security Council to support the American government to go to war (RITCHIE; ROGERS, 2007, p. 87-114). Bush then appointed Iraq as a menacing nation, and later received support from former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as Nick Ritchie and Paul Rogers (2007, p. 87-88) observe:

In March [2002], he insisted that "We cannot allow nations that have got a history of totalitarianism, dictatorship – a nation, for example, like Iraq that poisoned her own people – to develop a weapon of mass destruction and mate-up with terrorist organizations who hate freedom-loving countries." In April, with British Prime Minister Tony Blair at his side, he declared, "the worst thing that can happen is to allow this man [Saddam Hussein] to abrogate his promise, and hook up with a terrorist network ... We can't let it happen, we just can't let it happen". More emphatically, he declared in an interview with British television network ITV on 4 April 2002 that he had decided that Saddam had to be removed. (RITCHIE; ROGERS, 2007, p. 87-88).

Bush's administration's central claim to secure the approval of both the Congress and the United Nations was that Saddam Hussein was producing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, even though there was no evidence of such fact (RITCHIE; ROGERS, 2007, p. 94-118). In addition, the possible association between Hussein and al-Qaida⁵, and consequently with the terrorist attacks, was utilized as a strong reason to go to war (RITCHIE; ROGERS, 2007, p. 99-112), although, once again, no evidence was found to support such a charge (BERGEN, 2014). Peter Bergen (2014) discusses the lack of elements to authenticate the connection between Hussein and al-Qaida by stating that:

⁵ The author of this article decided to adopt the spelling of the word "al-Qaida" according to the usage chosen by Nick Richie and Paul Rodgers in *The Political Road to War with Iraq* (2007).

The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency had by 2006 translated 34 million pages of documents from Hussein's Iraq and found there was nothing to substantiate a "partnership" between Hussein and al Qaeda. Two years later the Pentagon's own internal think tank, the Institute for Defense Analyses, concluded after examining 600,000 Hussein-era documents and several thousand hours of his regime's audio - and videotapes that there was no "smoking gun (i.e. direct connection between Hussein's Iraq and al Qaeda.)".

The Congress authorized in October 2002 the war resolution (RITCHIE; ROGERS, 2007, p. 99 e 118-122), whilst the United Nations stated that the invasion of Iraq was illegal (EL-SHIBINY, 2010, p. 6). Nonetheless, on March 19, 2003, the United States and allies materialized their goal of invading Iraq (RITCHIE; ROGERS, 2007, p.112-118).

The parallel mentioned by Heaney between Bush and Creon can be perceived at the very beginning of *The Burial at Thebes*. The play starts with Antigone and her sister Ismene discussing the fate of their two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, who had died in battle. While Eteocles is treated as an honorable soldier and receives a dignified burial, Polyneices, considered a traitor by King Creon due to the fact that he fought against his own countrymen, has his body publicly exposed, evoking the feeling of humiliation. Creon creates a law that forbids anyone to properly bury Polyneices, including his sisters. Antigone then quotes Creon's statements regarding such an affair, displaying the King's hostility to those who do not obey his orders, as it follows in Heaney's translation (2005b, p. 3):

ANTIGONE. [...] 'I'll flush' em out,' he says.
Whoever isn't for us.
Is against us in this case.
Whoever breaks this law.
I'll have them stoned to death.' (54-58).

The fact that Heaney's Antigone cites the King's sentences⁶ suggests an emphasis on Creon's speech in the aforementioned passage, besides offering the opportunity to incorporate aspects of Bush's rhetoric into Creon's language. For instance, line 54

⁶ By establishing David Grene's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1991) as a significant work to correlate with Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, it is possible to observe that Grene's heroine refers to this passage differently, as she makes use of other words and does not quote Creon.

establishes a direct association between Bush and Creon, as Heaney argues that the selection of words for this sentence, more specifically “I’ll flush’ em out”, was influenced by the so-called “Bushism”, a term that refers to Bush’s own choice of words (O’DRISCOLL, 2009, p. 423). Indeed, the former American President applied a similar expression, “once you get them flushed out”, in his speech delivered on August 24, 2002, which is available at the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO) online archive, entitled “Remarks at a Dinner for Congressional Candidate Steve Peace in Las Cruces”. In this speech, Bush clarifies his plans regarding the eradication of terrorists in the Middle East, as he states that: “[...] the idea is, once you get them flushed out and get them on the run, there ought to be no place for them to light, no safe haven, no possible place to train” (*apud* “Remarks at a Dinner”, p. 1493). Lines 55 and 56 can also be connected with Bush’s own words, reinforcing the idea of coercion. On September 20, 2001, Bush delivered a speech entitled “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11” and pressured other countries to collaborate with his ideals. In this speech, also available at the GPO online archive, Bush declares that “every nation, in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (*apud* “Address Before a Joint Session”, p. 1142). Bush’s statement, which evokes a similar message of intimidation when compared to the aforementioned lines in the play, continues, and an association with the menacing content of lines 57 and 58 is suggested, as Bush remarks that “from this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime” (*apud* “Address Before a Joint Session”, p. 1142), implying severe consequences for those who decide to remain uncooperative.

Again, on November 6, 2001, the GPO online archive registers Bush’s conversation with former French President Jacques Chirac in a speech entitled “Remarks Following Discussions with President Jacques Chirac of France and an Exchange with Reporters”, in which Bush repeats his warning. He states that “you are either with us or you are against us in the fight against terror” (*apud* “Remarks Following Discussions”, p.1352), a sentence that also presents a similar content regarding lines 55 and 56 of the play. Bush continues and, alarmingly, comments on the future use of such warning: “And that’s going to be part of my speech at the United Nations” (*apud* “Remarks Following

Discussions”, p. 1352). Therefore, the former American President’s statements threatening other nations reveal his offensive position towards non-cooperative responses, and can be considered, as Heaney already remarked, a strategic maneuver to demand support from individuals and other countries in relation to Bush’s government’s goals concerning Iraq. By identifying an association between Bush’s statements and Creon’s assertions in Heaney’s work, it is then possible to perceive that both leaders act similarly since they threaten possible opponents and make their intentions clear regarding the harsh consequences for those unwilling to collaborate with their plans.

Also, Creon’s vehement insistence on carrying out Antigone’s punishment in *The Burial at Thebes* implies a connection with the events involving the war conflict in Iraq. In the play, Antigone is sentenced to death by Creon due to the fact that she buried Polyneices, and therefore broke the law. The King’s son, Haemon, who was going to marry Antigone, eagerly urges his father to reconsider such a severe decision and take into account “The use of reason [...]” (738) (HEANEY, 2005b, p. 31). Notwithstanding, Creon resolutely denies any alteration of his plans. While trying to convince the King to change his mind, Haemon mentions the general feeling of dissatisfaction, since Creon’s actions seem illogical, as it follows in Heaney’s translation (2005b, p. 31):

HAE MON. [...] And all that’s talked about.
In this city now is Antigone.
People are heartbroken for her. What,
They’re asking, did she do so wrong? What deserves.
A punishment like this [...]? (745-749).

In the passage cited above, Haemon voices the concern of the people at Thebes – and possibly his personal convictions – by citing them⁷. This suggests, along with Haemon’s request regarding the use of the word “reason” in line 738, an emphasis on both the absurdity of Creon’s inflexibility and Haemon’s desperate effort to modify his father’s ideas. Haemon then continues his pleading speech, emphasizing Antigone’s honorable behavior (2005b, p. 31):

⁷ Again, Heaney presents a different treatment of this passage, as Grene’s Haemon (1991, p. 208) paraphrases the people’s concerns: “But what I can hear, in the dark, are things like these: / the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying most wrongly and most undeservedly (...) (746-748)”.

HAE MON. She should be honoured – a woman who rebelled!
Rebelled when her brother's corpse was being thrown.
To the carrion crows. *She was heroic!* (750-752).

Bush's administration also strenuously insisted on the pursuit of its destructive goal, which was the military occupation of Iraq, neglecting different opinions on the subject. The American government ignored the opposition from other countries and individuals around the world, as the article entitled “Potência Isolada” (“Isolated Power”) (2003, p. 50) published by *Veja* states, as well as the unconditional lack of endorsement from the United Nations. Bearing in mind that *The Burial at Thebes* was inspired by situations regarding the war conflict in Iraq, and that the previously mentioned lines suggest an emphasis on the King's obstinate decision, it is possible to imply a connection between Creon's insistence on maintaining Antigone's rigorous punishment and Bush's persistence in pursuing the damaging goal of a military invasion. Both leaders then defend debatable resolutions, and disregard the reevaluation of their purposes and the claim of the opposing voices.

In addition, the barbarous circumstances involving Antigone's death sentence implies an association with the maltreatment of prisoners by the American government during Bush's presidency in war situations. The treatment of prisoners by Bush's government is commented by Harkin (2008, p. 305) who explains that Heaney's play makes a connection with the “unlawful combatants” in Guantánamo Bay, who were not considered prisoners of war. Fleur Johns (2005, p. 617) remarks that “as ‘unlawful combatants’, Guantánamo Bay detainees are cast both beyond the pale of non-violent political discourse and beyond the legal bounds of warfare”. In the play, according to Creon, Antigone must be imprisoned in a cave and left there to die, strongly conveying the sense of cruelty. The seer Tiresias, condemning the King's orders, asserts that “You have buried her alive [...]” (1093) (HEANEY, 2005b, p. 46), reinforcing the idea of brutality concerning Antigone's punishment. The following lines in Heaney's translation (2005b, p.36) display Creon firstly declaring the details of her sentence:

CREON. Up in the rocks, up where nobody goes,
There's a steep path that leads higher, to a cave.
[...] And once she's in, she can pray to her heart's content.
To her god of death. (829-835).

Later on, the King impatiently instructs: “Just get her ready and march. / March to the rock vault, wall her in and leave” (936-937) (HEANEY, 2005b, p. 39), once again evoking the image of barbarity and mercilessness. Antigone, however, does not regret her actions and seems to be perfectly aware of Creon’s ruthlessness (2005b, p. 41):

CHORUS. She’s still unreconciled, as driven as ever.

CREON. The quicker then they move her on, the better.

ANTIGONE. This man’s words are as cold as death itself.

CREON. They’re meant to be. Meant to destroy your hope.
The sentence stands. The law will take its course.

In relation to the issue in which the United States harshly dealt with captured enemies in war conflicts during Bush’s government, the maltreatment of the prisoners in the abhorrent episode that took place in Afghanistan in 2001 can be appointed as a significant example. Such an episode is commented by Derek Gregory (2004, p. 63-64), as follows:

In November 2001 thousands of Taliban troops were captured in an operation directed by the Fifth US Special Forces Group around Kunduz. Four hundred of them were taken to Qala-i-Jhangi fortress on the outskirts of Mazar-i-Sharif, a town once before and now again ruled by Abdul Rashid Dostum and his Jimbishi-Milli, the second large group in the Northern Alliance. When their Northern Alliance guards started to tie their hands together, the prisoners apparently feared they were about to be executed and a revolt broke out. American airstrikes were called in, and missiles and bombs pulverized the building; British SAS and US Special Forces troops then arrived to direct a ferocious ground assault by Northern Alliance militias. When the dust finally settled, reporter Luke Harding found “a death scene that Dante or Bosch might have conjured up” [...]. “Instead there was an avalanche of death from the sky”. Several hundred of those who died still had their hands tied. Thousands more Taliban captives were sent to another prison compound at Shiberghan. They were loaded into sealed freight containers and the trucks left to stand in the sun for several days [...] By the end of the journey as 2,000-3,000 of the prisoners were dead, some from lack of air and water, others from their wounds”.

A suggestive criticism can be then implied in Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes*, as such horrifying and cruel treatment of the prisoners demonstrates that both governments, in spite of the differences in time, alarmingly disregarded the life and wellbeing of their

prisoners, which is a subject that is contemporarily connected to the issue of human rights.

In conclusion, the contemporary political context regarding the war conflict in Iraq is highlighted in Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, as aspects involving the event can be perceived in Heaney's translation of *Antigone*. It is possible to observe similarities between Bush's language and Creon's assertions, as well as in both leaders' questionable decisions. In addition, the issue regarding the appalling treatment of prisoners becomes an element shared by both governments. The title of this paper "Whoever isn't for us is against us in this case": The Role of Contextualization in Seamus Heaney's *The Burial of Thebes* quotes one of Creon's statements mentioned in this article which points to the relationship between Heaney's playtext and the war in Iraq. Heaney's version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, therefore, proposes a contemporary and critical approach regarding the deeds performed by abusive governments, a valuable theme for discussions on present-day matters, especially taking into consideration the current political crisis in Brazil and the critical world scenario.

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