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# New Uses of Traditional Healing in Contemporary Irish Literature

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**Abstract.** This is a comparative study in two ways. After a summary of the historical and cultural research into traditional healing which is relevant to this article, then some comments about the general usage of such themes in contemporary Irish literature, the article moves on to examine the role and function of traditional healing as a motif in four specific literary texts. These are: two Irish plays, Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*, and Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel*, and two pieces of Irish fiction, P.J. Curtis' novel *The Lightning Tree* and Claire Keegan's short story "The Night of the Quicken Trees". Strong similarities are found on many fronts between the texts, especially in the acceptance of healing and the mystery associated with it. However, differences also occur, depending on the artistic choices of the authors, the gender and community emphasis used, and the relative importance of healing in the context of the work. Women healers seem to be more rooted and less tragic than their male counterparts, but all healers are seen paradoxically as both an asset and a potential threat to society. When these texts are compared with research into historical and cultural aspects of Irish folk medicine, they clearly draw on tradition for their plot elements, but only in the fiction and plays can the full dramatic potential of these life and death situations be explored.

**Key Words.** Irish literature, folklore, history, drama, healing, tradition, mystery.

**Resumen.** Éste es un estudio comparativo en dos sentidos. Tras un resumen de la investigación histórica y cultural llevada a cabo sobre la sanación tradicional que compete a este trabajo, así como observaciones sobre el uso generalizado de tales temas en la literatura contemporánea irlandesa, se examina el papel y la función de la sanación tradicional como motivo en cuatro obras literarias en particular. Se trata de las obras teatrales irlandesas *Faith Healer* de Brian Friel y *Blackwater Angel* de Jim Nolan y dos piezas de ficción irlandesa, la novela *The Lightning Tree* de P.J. Curtis y el relato "The Night of the Quicken Trees" de Claire Keegan. Se advierten poderosas similitudes entre los textos, especialmente en la aceptación de la sanación y el misterio que ésta lleva asociado. No obstante, también se detectan diferencias, de acuerdo con las elecciones artísticas de los autores, la centralidad que se da al género y a la comunidad, y la relativa importancia de la sanación en el contexto de la obra. Las mujeres curanderas parecen estar más arraigadas y ser menos trágicas que sus homólogos masculinos, pero paradójicamente todos los curanderos son valorados y a al mismo tiempo considerados una posible amenaza para la sociedad. Cuando se contrastan estos textos con la investigación llevada a cabo sobre los aspectos históricos y culturales de la medicina irlandesa popular se observa que se nutren de la tradición para los elementos de la trama, mas únicamente en la ficción y las piezas teatrales se encuentran todo el potencial dramático de esas situaciones de vida y muerte.

**Palabras clave.** Literatura irlandesa, folclore, historia, drama, sanación, tradición, misterio.

## INTRODUCTION

### Historical and Cultural Research into Folk Healing

Traditional healing was once found all across the world, especially the herbal forms (“Domestic plant medicine represents the home survival kit” Hatfield 2005: 1). Remnants of these old customs can be found documented across the world, in written form, and these are possibly just a fraction of the knowledge passed down orally over the centuries. However, all is not lost. Herbalists in various Irish counties have flourishing practices. In Ireland, informal groups such as the Clare Oral History Project collect information and pass it down to others in meetings and publications; in one such meeting recently, fear was expressed by several attendees that such knowledge was being lost to our age, and that unless action is taken now it will be lost to future generations. More formal associations such as the Centre for the History of Medicine (CHOMI), based in University College Dublin, hold regular academic conferences and seminars for the same purpose. Similar research is being carried out in other countries in Europe, and books such as *Evidence-Based Herbal Medicine* (2002) are coming out from the United States. Some of the more enterprising works are not content with description and documentation, but attempt to construct a rationale for the value of the research, for example, Moore and McClean’s *Folk Healing and Health Care Practices in Britain and Ireland* (2010), which seeks to link folk healing with Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). Attempts are also being made to understand how some of the more esoteric practices, such as using cobwebs to heal cuts, and charms, can be effective. Some of these are clinical trials, as in the US book above. One of these fields centres around investigations of what is called, sometimes dismissively, the “placebo effect”, but which a number of serious practitioners and researchers believe has more deep-rooted physical and psychological effects yet to be fully explored, for example Finnis *et al* 2010.

This system of healing has parallels in the ancient history of all cultures throughout the world, whether it be the efficacy of herbal remedies discovered locally, or the power and respect accorded to the medicine man or woman

(Keith Thomas 1991, Rotblatt and Ziment 2002, Wildwood 1999). In Western Europe, it has largely yielded place to conventional medicine, but with pockets of older belief and custom in place; as Gabrielle Hatfield says: “... within the Celtic tradition, it is more likely that magico-religious elements of healing have played a greater part than in the rest of Britain, and the remnants of this can still be seen today ... [in the] Highlands of Scotland ... Wales ... [and] Ireland” 2005: 139). This will be echoed in *Faith Healer*, in that the characters in that play confine themselves to practice in Wales, Scotland and Ireland (Friel 1984: 332). However, as we see in Moore and McClean’s book above, these pockets of belief and practice have expanded in the last decade.

Some aspects of the older customs may seem to be rooted in pre-Christian tradition. Christianity adapted itself to this in converting old practices into religious ones. However, vestiges of paganism remained, to lead to conflict between the establishment, particularly the organised Churches, and the healers. Timothy Corrigan Correll describes the historical situation:

From the seventeenth century onwards, the leaders of the Catholic Church followed Tridentine directives that sought to impose uniformity in religious standards and practices. This included the enactment of synodal statutes aimed at routing magical and quasi-religious customs, including superstitious curing and beliefs... (2005: 1).

Perhaps the notable of these disputes in Ireland were those of clergy with the Co. Clare wise woman, Biddy Early, paralleled in two of the literary texts considered below, the healing women in both Keegan’s and Curtis’ fiction. Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch’s *Book of the Cailleach* describes the tradition of the *bean leighis* in many parts of Ireland: “A starting point is the acknowledgement that the Irish wise-woman is a healer – by predominantly symbolic means – of crisis trauma”, and “[t]he treatment [she] proffers ... ranges way beyond herbalism.” (2003: 72, 73). He looks at the traits and characteristics of these women, and their place in the community. As the healers in the literary texts below ask for no payment but are recompensed in kind, this is borne out by the research on people who cure the sick; Ó Cruaíoch in his *Book of the Cailleach* says

that no payment is requested by such women, as the gift is otherworldly (2003: 190, 201). He links it with ancient goddess worship:

... these occasionally powerful females are structurally parallel, in the cultural logic of ancestral tradition, to the mythic goddess of native Irish cosmology... In many stories her power is shown to be equal to or better than that of the priest in respect of the diagnosis and healing of affliction; often the priest is taught a lesson that silences his criticism of the wise-woman and the community's reliance on her in times of crisis. Thus the legendary wise-woman successfully opposes the male agent of the male divinity of the patriarchal world religion, ... (2003: 74-5; cf Thomas 1991: 559-598).

### **Traditional Healing in Irish Literary Texts**

The theme of traditional healing might be expected to figure in older literature, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, or in historical fiction, as in the nineteenth century Irish novels of Maria Edgeworth, Lady Morgan and William Carleton. We may not expect to find it in contemporary Irish work, especially that written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, when a selection of literature is examined, references to herbal and faith healing occur not infrequently. Examples are Paula Meehan's use of the soothing power of wildflowers in her poem "From Source to Sea" (Meehan 2009: 70) and Marian Keyes' motif of healing herbs associated with Fionn the gardener in her 2009 novel *The Brightest Star in the Sky* (2009: pp.409, 397 etc). Books inspired by Ireland also use the theme, for example, a novel based on the Famine, *The Law of Dreams*, by Canadian Peter Behrens, has a "wise woman" character, who gives an abortifacient potion to a girl on board ship (Behrens 2007). This should not be so surprising, given the contemporary rise of interest in and academic research of the topic, often associated with an increasing recourse to alternative medicines.

### **Chosen texts**

From all the possible choices, this article will focus on Brian Friel's play *Faith Healer* (1980), Jim Nolan's play *Blackwater Angel* (2001), a short story called "Night of the Quicken Trees" from Claire Keegan's collection *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007), and P. J. Curtis' novel *The Lightning Tree* (2006). Note the dates of publication: while the Friel work dates from 1980, the other three were

written within the last decade. As to the time in which they are placed, apart from the Nolan play, it is mainly in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This may be in line with Zimmermann's observation that scenes of traditional storytelling tend to be set one generation back, in a "no-man's land between the present and historical" (2001: 260) but some of the scenarios in these works seem to be timeless, in an Ireland which does not change very much.

The depiction of healing in these texts is treated in a factual way, whether that be rooted in history, folklore, or founded on people's lives; for example, the author of *The Lightning Tree* stated in an interview that eighty per cent of the happenings in the novel are taken from the real life of the main character (Lynch 2010). The gift of curing is discussed to some extent in these works, but never fully comprehended. Healers and their powers are mysterious to the people who come to them for help, who both need and fear them, and who turn against them in the end, in ways that are psychologically and physically threatening. Women healers tend to be more of the people and eventually happy in their personal lives, while male healers are seen to be more set apart, more troubled, and more tragic than their female counterparts. When these texts are compared with research into historical and cultural aspects of Irish folk medicine, they show evidence of drawing on tradition for their plot elements, but only in the fiction and plays can the full dramatic potential of these life and death situations be explored.

### **Places**

The places where healing is used, in the case of all four authors, are small towns or rural areas. These places further tend to be linked with the idea of tradition, by being set in parts of Ireland which are the most western, most isolated, and most removed from the metropolis: seventeenth century rural Co. Waterford in *Blackwater Angel*, Donegal for *Faith Healer*, and Co. Clare for both of the others.

The female healers are usually very much of the people, for the people. They may have a heritage of curing through their families, as does Mariah in Curtis' *The Lightning Tree*. All of this family are taught by older members how to gather herbs, how to use them, and how

to employ charms (2008: 10; 35-6); the transmission of the gift has a mythic origin, coming either from St Patrick, or from a monk helped to escape from Cromwellian soldiery (2008: 36). Margaret in the Keegan short story "Night of the Quicken Trees" is so local that her family and her personal tragedies are known by all in the neighbourhood. Her gift is not hereditary in the strict sense, but comes from the fact that she is a "seventh child" (2007: 171). The male protagonists are not so rooted. Friel's character advertises himself as a seventh son, but admits that this is not true (1984: 332). There is a suggestion of family transmission when he surmises that his child "might have had the gift" (2008:372), but in general his possession of it is mysterious and its origin is never explained. Nolan's hero has no idea why he has been chosen and given the gift of healing, which is at odds with his Puritan heritage.

### **Modes of operation**

The ways in which the healers function may be practical, using herbs, but often have a dimension of the otherworldly. Keegan and Curtis indicate cures for emotional and mental states as well as for physical illnesses. Not so Friel and Nolan; all of the ailments cured in the two plays are physical. All of the healers make a marked use of their hands, to give patients the comfort of human touch. In the story "Night of the Quicken Trees", Margaret's method of curing ranges from getting a man with a toothache to put a frog in his mouth to laying her hands on people. In the Curtis novel, remedies may be charms but are mainly herbal, using water from a special well drawn on May morning, and the practitioners recommend that patients go further when problems are outside the healer's powers. They also counsel the troubled. In Friel's play Frank Hardy places his hands on people, and sometimes uses massage, for example, to straighten a twisted finger (1984: 333, 339). He does not use charms, unless it be the recitation of a series of place-names to help his own preparation (1984:343-4). Greatrakes strokes the afflicted patients, as he prays aloud to God for healing for them (Nolan: 2001, 12). In this, he would seem to be closer to the conventional spiritual healer than the others above.

### **Recompense in kind**

The healers do not make a fortune from their work, or anything approaching it. Recompense is mainly in kind: patients leave items like new potatoes, rhubarb, pots of jam, bags of apples, and bags of sticks outside Margaret's door. This is very similar for the healing family in *The Lightning Tree* as to the items given (Curtis 2008: 17, 19, 65). It resembles the customs of the *bean leighis* above. In Friel's play, the stage directions show Frank's effort to keep up appearances but he is very poor, like his patients (1984: 331); one instance of a farmer giving him two hundred pounds is the exception (1984: 342-3). Greatrakes not only does not receive money, but the effort to feed patients who crowd around his home leaves him cleared out of provisions and unable to get more on credit from merchants.

### **Mystery**

The mystery going with the gift of healing is associated with another, which all four texts share; all of the healers, or someone close to them, have second sight. In Keegan, a fortune-teller gives precise instructions for Margaret's future happiness as well as telling her what has happened in the past. Mariah in *The Lightning Tree* sees ghosts and talks with them (Curtis 2008: 9, 32-3). Friel's character has this mysterious faculty also: in his work, he knows whom he can cure, and when he will succeed (1984: 368), but also foresees when nothing is going to happen. Challenged on his return to Ireland to heal a crippled young man, Frank knows McGarvey before he meets him, is aware that this man will not be healed, and foresees not only that this will cause his own death, but envisages the whole scene of the murder beforehand (1984: 340). Greatrakes knows that he has been chosen, but does not know why, and the gift deserts him for some time because of a lack of faith (Nolan 2001: 13).

The healer who inherits all these mysterious powers is usually alone, isolated in society. Margaret is solitary in her Co. Clare locality, initially without a single friend, except for the man next door who watches and waits, and eventually becomes her lover. In the Friel play, Frank Hardy has a wife and manager with whom he travels, but he seems unable to keep up normal relations with these people; he

deserts them while his baby is born. He is cut off from his own parents. Nolan's protagonist loses his wife, children, and his money. He is regarded with suspicion as exhibiting behaviour more characteristic of "Papist" priests than a follower of Cromwell. The family of healers in the Curtis novel do have close family links with each other but are cut off from the wider community (Curtis 2008: 57); Mariah is even seen as a witch. The separation from their neighbours of this family is also accentuated by the acute disapproval of the clergy.

In reading all of these texts, society's attitude is seen to be ambivalent to healers. They have initially a high value when people can be helped, but they are feared. This fear turns eventually to hostility. When Margaret Flusk decides to stop her ministry because she believes that her child will suffer, nasty things happen to her: she finds the tyres of her car flat, and peacock feathers stuffed through the letterbox (Keegan 2007: 179). In *The Lightning Tree* the healer and her family endure excommunication of one member, the ultimate form of cutting off from a Church-dominated society (Curtis 2008: 36, 38). Greatrakes is pursued by crowds of angry, despairing people when he stops his ministry. The most extreme example of aggression is that meted out to the Friel character, who is murdered when he is unable to heal the paralysed man.

### Nature of gift

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the texts concern discussion of the power to heal. Claire Keegan's story shows the gift in operation, but apart from the fortune teller saying that Margaret is a seventh child, the nature of the gift is not discussed, just shown in operation; Keegan seems to be far more interested in human pain than in metaphysics. There is considerably more attention given to it in the Curtis novel. Apart from transmission through the family, the author in the words of the protagonist tries in various ways to define it:

a Spirit or force which springs from a well deep within; a deep knowing, a pure wisdom; fine-tuning of the senses ... dreaming of an old dream ... a quiet voice from some unknown and unknowable place ... a surge of a strange power ... [and] from our knowledge of the earth all around us (Curtis 2008: 196-7).

In an interview, the author of *The Lightning Tree* said that the power was "an innate gift", but also stated that the training of the next generation began at a very early age. He conceded that it probably owed something to faith, custom, and the placebo effect, but was mostly due to the greatness of being human, "that we have power to heal and to destroy" (Lynch 2010).

Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel* has a great deal in common with Friel's *Faith Healer*, as critics have noted (Clarke 2001). These two plays feature even more discussion of the power than the works above: "A craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, a vocation without a ministry" (Friel 1984: 333). It questions what happens when healing occurs. When Frank makes someone whole, he feels whole in himself and perfect in himself, an aristocrat, and the questions stop. These questions play an important role in the whole plot: is he a conman or is it a gift? He asks himself:

Was it all chance? – or skill? – or illusion? – or delusion? Precisely what power did I possess? Could I summon it? When and how? Was I its servant? Did it reside in my ability to invest someone with faith in me or did I evoke from him a healing faith in himself? Could my healing be effected without faith? But faith in what? in me? – in the possibility? – faith in faith? And is the power diminishing? (Friel 1984: 333-4).

Frank is disapproved of by the middle class in the form of Grace's parents by being called a "mountebank" (Friel 1984: 336, 348, 349, 371) but unlike *The Lightning Tree*, no Church censorship comes into the matter. On the other hand, he is associated with a number of Christ-like images, for example, healing ten people, of whom only one comes back to say thanks. His death is seen by Frank himself as a sort of self-immolation, a Crucifixion of a messianic figure: he "offered himself to them" (1984: 376). Similarly, *Blackwater Angel* shows the healer Valentine Greatrakes torn between faith and the need to see proof, between his gift from God and the feeling that God has abandoned him (Nolan 2001: 52, 66). While Frank's wife disapproves of his self-immolation, Greatrakes' wife believes that her husband and herself were destined to be sacrificed to his mission (Nolan 2001:48).

The most important aspect of *Faith Healer* concerns the healer as artist (Friel 1984: 346). Grace says that Frank had to recreate her and his father and everyone he met as fictions, but they became real if he cured them: “it seemed to me that he kept remaking people according to some private standard of excellence of his own” (Friel 1984: 345, 346). She never understood what she calls “this gift, this craft, this talent, this art, this magic” but does realise that it was “his essence” (Friel 1984: 349), that “the only thing that mattered to him was his work” (1984: 360). Similarly, in *Blackwater Angel*, the work of Greatrakes is closely paralleled in value, faith, and experience of persecution with that of a troupe of travelling actors. Their leader reproaches Greatrakes, who has been a Cromwellian soldier, for the wrongs which Cromwell did to them:

EVERARD: You were not twelve when you fought under Cromwell’s flag. The theatres were yet closed, Mr Greatrakes. ... But do you know, Mr Greatrakes, during that time I was consoled by unassailable truths: they banned us because they were afraid; they silenced us because we were a voice for those who had none; they broke our hearts because we gave heart to those whose hearts were broken; they crippled us because we could heal (Nolan 2001: 35-6, 42).

In the Friel play, both Grace and Teddy see the power as opposition to cultivated intelligence and structured thought. Teddy contrasts Frank’s “talent” with his brains, and says the two are incompatible (Friel 1984: 357); Grace declares that Frank insisted on dragging her “mental rigour” and “legal mind” into feud with his talent (Friel 1984: 349-350). This is paralleled in the Nolan play by the rebuke of actor Everard when Greatrakes desires to understand the pure gift of angelic song possessed by young Angel: “This child *is* what she *is*, sir. Take from it what you will. But you will dissect her no more!” (Nolan 2001: 52)

### Sum-up

To sum up the elements which the four texts have in common: none of them shows the healing as having anything to do with fairy legends, as in Lady Gregory’s works. Secondly, they are all based either on real life happenings, as in Curtis, on a historical character, as in Nolan, or on traditional folklore in Keegan and Friel. Thirdly, all lay

bare human misery and emotion, and efforts to overcome it are seen as inadequate. This applies not only to the sufferings of patients, but the healers themselves are shown as in the throes of great pain. The protagonist of *The Lightning Tree* experiences catastrophic loss on the death of her lover, though she eventually comes to an accommodation with her life, as she knows that a healer cannot work if he or she has pain in the heart (Curtis 2008: 120). In Keegan’s story, Margaret has been betrayed and deserted by her lover, cast off by her family, and her child has died, so she is distraught to the point of being suicidal. The two plays, however, have most emphasis on suffering. Frank Hardy is a very flawed character who parallels Margaret Flusk with his pain in the past, his fractious relationship with his wife, the stillborn birth of his child, but especially the tormenting questions that rot his life; he tries to drown them with whiskey. His relationship with his patients is also a source of grief; he says that they hate him because he exposes their desperation and confirms it (Friel 1984: 336, 367). He suffers from the pain that is a necessary accompaniment of the gift, and welcomes death as release from uncertainty. Greatrakes suffers in a similar way, but the end of the play shows him restored to his saving powers, to his family, and to peace of mind.

The texts also differ in a number of ways. Three show local healing in operation: the female healers in Keegan’s story and Curtis’ novel all carry out their services for the people in the area where they live, and Nolan’s Greatrakes works from home to heal all of the people who come to him there. The fourth text, Friel’s *Faith Healer*, features a travelling practitioner; Frank Hardy works between Scotland, Wales, and finally Ireland. In two cases, the Keegan short story and the Curtis novel, the main protagonists are women, while in the other two, the plays by Friel and Nolan, they are men. The fear which people have towards the female healers in the Keegan and Curtis fiction has similarities with and differences from the plight of the male practitioners in Nolan’s and Friel’s plays. The source of power for the heroines of Keegan and Curtis is to some extent explained and rooted in the community. They treat people for psychological and spiritual ailments, too, unlike the male practitioners whose patients

have physical ills only. They suffer greatly, but eventually thrive and prosper. The male healers are more mysterious, dislocated and tragic. Greatrakes loses his wife, children and peace of mind, is pursued by a mob in the local town, and just manages to survive in the end; Frank Hardy is murdered by his own people.

### Conclusions

How do the portrayals of traditional healing in literature compare with historical and cultural research into the field? The answer is complex, as the distinction is not clear-cut; for example, the author of *The Lightning Tree* has said in an interview that it is based on a real person whom he knew very well, that eighty percent of the happenings are fact (Lynch 2010). The Keegan story is like a half-way house between fact and fiction, in that a glossary into the customs is provided. Parallels to the situations and healers in the stories, novel, and play can all be found in Patrick Logan's invaluable book on Irish folk medicine (1980). As we see in the research of Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha (2000), transmission through families who pass the gift on to succeeding generations seems to follow from the tradition that ancient Irish chieftains had hereditary families of physicians attached to them, who held high positions in that older society. With the fall of the Gaelic chiefs after the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, remnants of these medical families became absorbed into the general populace, where they continued their work.

Secondly, what can the literary texts offer the reader which historical research does not? While the latter shows us some of the drama and human emotions involved in transactions between healers and healed, literary texts can go further by exploring the human emotions, bringing subjectivity to bear on the objective, and capitalising on the drama; in fact, literary creativity in presenting the topic of healing was

begun by Irish oral storytellers (Ó Cruaí 2003: 14-15). This dramatisation is especially marked in the two plays, *Faith Healer* and *Blackwater Angel*, which are more literary than the two fiction works considered in this article in that they are consciously constructed as tragedies, and less linked to the recorded practices of traditional healers, than in the works of fiction by Curtis and Keegan. Marked out by unusual gifts which simultaneously make them desirable to society and the object of jealousy and suspicion, Frank Hardy and Valentine Greatrakes become more vulnerable to attack. While Greatrakes is saved at the end, Hardy welcomes death as finally removing all uncertainty; he is a figure of the doomed artist in society rather than a healer who belongs.

Finally, in the worlds created by all four authors, belief in the gift of healing is inherent, with no sense of incongruity. Grene's argument concerning *Faith Healer* that "[b]elief lives on, if at all, in the Celtic fringes ... a grubby half-world of faith healing, a last refuge of the irrational among disbelievers" (2006: 61) would seem to be contradicted by the arguments of Friel and Nolan that the rational brain stops cures from happening, in the two plays. Here the playwrights echo theories of nineteenth century Romantic writers about the creativity and visionary powers of human imagination; it is through this faculty that they "see into the life of things" (Wordsworth 1973: 147), because reason is inferior to imagination: "Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance" (Shelley 1973: 746).

In the last analysis, audiences and readers of these four literary texts are left with more of a sense of mystery and wonder at the human condition than history, folklore or medical books can hope to effect.

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