The Sound and the Fury: Verbal Pre-texts in Vincent Woods's *A Cry from Heaven*

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As a poet, playwright, art critic, journalist, and radio broadcaster, Vincent Woods has variously been involved and engaged with the written and spoken word, which finds an outlet in the diversity of his creative production. He describes his first encounter with words at an early age as a kind of spell: "Almost the first time somebody read to me, I think I fell in love with words and stories" (Strain). The title of his 1994 poetry collection, *The Colour of Words*—a synaesthesia in an extended sense—provides an insightful perspective into his work, in which the history of Ireland and the legacy of tradition and folklore intertwine with his consciousness of the power of language and words. In an interview, Woods mentions the influence of Tom Murphy's play *Bailegangaire* as the "exploration of language as well as exploration of place, people, history and story" (Barry 482). In a similar way, Tom Mac Intyre's theatrical rendering of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* had a great impact: "What was so interesting for me was the *deconstruction* of language . . . which is *dismantling* the poem and *creating* his vivid and vibrant piece of theatre" (Barry 483, emphasis added).

Woods's *A Cry from Heaven* (2005) follows these lines of deconstruction, dismantlement, and recreation in the exploration of a well-known story from the Irish saga, in which words and language play a dominant role. In fact, the play is a perceptive, provocative, and personal rewriting in the twenty-first century of the old legend of Deirdre and the Sons of Usna[1]; written in blank verse it is "partly a nod to the past, to the great work of Yeats and Synge" (Bastos 116), and partly—one may add—a reflection on language. References to words and the power of words, prophecies, orders, promises, prohibitions, oaths, and laments constantly recur throughout the play, as they recur in the different versions of the legend, and explicit performative verbs of saying—"I say the child should live," "I say kill her," "I ask you, please don't do this" "I say again: / Look what your mercy's brought" (Woods 15, 17, 37, 112)—are interlaced with reiterated references to stories and storytelling. Concern with language and words is evident also in the use of different codes used in the play. For example, the language of politics, power (Jones 5), and war characterizes act 1 with the rhetorical organization of discourse and vocabulary in words like "victory," "power," "division," "honour," "throne," "dissention." This is juxtaposed to

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the use of lyrical language throughout the play, for example, in Naoise's celebration of the beauty of Ulster in act 5, or in Leabharcham's extended outpouring of emotional tension early in act 2:

> Cathach,
> Where are you tonight?
> So absent from me
> . . .
> I look into the water,
> Your face is dabbling
> Just within my reach.
> My hand goes out to touch you,
> And the water breaks between my fingers . . . . (Woods 24)

On the other hand, the violent and wordless action occasionally occurring on stage seems to contradict the lyrical language generally used by the characters (Nunes 54), and, therefore, casts doubts on the authority of language. Furthermore, physical violence, be it breaking objects, fights, deaths, killings, or rape to be enacted on stage, is generally not accompanied or supported by verbal utterances, which enhances the subtext of violence that underlies the play and, paradoxically, gives voice to what is not said.

This essay examines the role words and language play in the multiple sources of *A Cry from Heaven* and focuses on words and language in their various facets as structuring principles in the play. In this respect Vincent Woods manipulates the original material in stylistic choices and in structural organization, which gives the play unity as well as uniqueness. The original story in its different versions, adaptations, and folklore renditions follows more or less the same plot. The birth of Deirdre, a girl of great beauty, creates anxiety when the druid Cathach prophesies she will bring turmoil and destruction to Ulster. Against the will of the Ulstermen, King Conor orders Deirdre reared in seclusion to become his wife in due time. When Deirdre meets and falls in love with the warrior Naoise, the couple elopes to Scotland, where they spend seven years in exile. Once they come back to Ulster with the promise of forgiveness, betrayal awaits them. Naoise and his brothers are killed, and Deirdre either commits suicide or dies besides her lover's body.

As a matter of fact, what is generally known as the Deirdre story is a protean text with a multiple life. The Old Irish version, eighth-century *Longes mac N-Uisleann*, (*The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*), belongs as a *remscela*, or prefatory tale, to the epic of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*). It is this version that Vincent Woods follows more closely; part of the epic that could stand

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apart as an independent, self-contained narrative, opening with the birth of the protagonist and closing with her death. It is thus a unit within the unit, and in the economy of *Táin*, *Longes* has the function of justifying the presence of Ulster exiles on the side of the Connaught army later on in the war to obtain the Brown Bull of Cúailnge.

A Middle-Irish version, *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach* (The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach), remembered as the "romantic" version, is the one which provided inspiration for the writers of the Revival. Here, the circumstances of Deirdre's birth and the prophecy are omitted (Hull 2), and "all the introductory matter . . . is taken as read" (Quin 58). The story develops around the protagonists' exile in Scotland, focuses on Fergus's betrayal and the death of the heroes, leaving room for the number of poems included, for combats (Hull 2), and for the concern with magic and omens (McHugh 41). Deirdre's death is made less gory and violent. Rather than dashing her head against a boulder, as in *Longes*, in *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach*, she either dies beside her lover's body or kills herself with a knife.

The story of Deirdre provided an endless source of inspiration, starting with MacPherson's *Darthula*, published as one of his "Ossianic poems" around 1765, and Samuel Ferguson's "Death of the Children of Usnach" in *Hibernian Nights Entertainments* (1834). Between then and the mid-twentieth century, over thirty different remakes or works variously indebted to the Deirdre story developed in various forms, either in prose, poetry or drama (Fackler 152-53). The well-known dramatic versions in the years of the Irish Literary Revival by AE (George Russell), Yeats, and Synge are part of a programmatic and increasing awareness of identity and national pride. "Recovery of the legends [writes John Wilson Foster] was recovery of a Heroic Ireland in the sense not merely of unearthing or restoring to health but of enabling a rebirth" (127).

If Woods's *Cry* is probably the first play to go back to the epic, and especially the story of Deirdre, in the twenty-first century, it is certainly not the only one in relatively recent years. A play called *Deirdre* is part of Ulick O'Connor's *Three Noh Plays* presented at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1978. Brian Friel's celebrated play of 1979, *Faith Healer*, groundbreaking in its use of monologues, is, according to Declan Kiberd, structurally and yet, cryptically, indebted to the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Usna. Kiberd actually considers Friel's play as a rewriting of the Old-Irish legend of *Longes* (106). In a different way, Mary-Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's *Women in Arms*, first performed in 1984 and then presented at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1988, sheds light on the story of four of the major female figures from the Ulster Cycle, Nessa, Macha, Deirdre, and Maeve (McMullan 36).

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It is worth considering whether such return to the world of epic and saga is a step back into the past, or may carry some contemporary relevance. In an interview with Margaret Strain in 2006, Woods juxtaposes his desire "to do something new" with the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Usna to his intention "to address what I perceive as the end of something in Ireland—almost the end of mythology, the end of legend" (Strain). He sees such an end in the plan for the construction of the M3 Motorway, designed to cross the Boyne Valley not far from the historical site of the Hill of Tara. J. Jones develops such juxtaposition in detail, emphasizing the rediscovery—so to speak—of the Hill of Tara and Woods's play as a way to bring "the distant past into present light" as well as questions of responsibility towards Ireland's ancient past (2). From this point of view, Deirdre's reiterated remark in act 5, scene 1—"This is where it ends" (Woods 94)—can be read as the end of myth and of legend. On the other hand, further implications are embedded at a metatextual and metatheatrical level: the end is the end of the story and the end of the play, which highlights a form of self-reflective investigation of language and words that Vincent Woods takes up in his own version of the story.

Woods's choice to retrieve the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Usna from the past and tell it again in the new century is explained by the timelessness of the story he wanted to tell "for its own sake" (Strain). In an interview with Beatriz Bastos, he said:

> It's one of these eternally rich and relevant stories, and a great tragedy of Irish story-telling. Deirdre and the Sons of Usna is a story with parallels in mythology and story-telling all around the world . . . it has love, it has sex, it has great passion. . . . it is one of these eternal stories. It fascinated me at the time . . . and I felt that I strongly wanted to tell this story again.
>
> (Bastos 116)

Premiering at the Abbey Theatre on 9 June 2005, *Cry* had a very mixed reception. Some of the choices in the "expressionistic treatment" given to the production by French director Olivier Py (Wallace, Pílný 47) perplexed the audience: from the "ghost-white make-up" (O'Brian) to "on-stage rain, male and female nudity, simulated sex acts" (Fricker), all of which tended to obscure both the original story and Woods's remake. Fintan O'Toole criticized the play's "linear narrative" and the "lack of fluency, immediacy and variety," thus creating "a barrier between the story and a contemporary audience" (O'Toole). Patrick Lonergan counts *Cry* among the "summertime

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flops" at the Abbey between 1990 and 2005 (155). José Lanters, by contrast, considers this version of the Deirdre story "the antithesis" of the *Deirdre*s of the Revival period and appreciates the play's "transnational approach." *Cry* is for Lanters a novelty in the general involvement of Irish playwrights with Greek tragedy, exploited to provide more Irish and political overtones emphasizing allegories of Irishness; the various versions of *Antigone*, including Seamus Heaney's 2004 *The Burial at Thebes* (Lanters 38-39), are typical examples. Woods's play instead "reverses th(is) trend" by turning to Irish mythology and to the past of Irish saga.

If compared to previous dramatic renditions of the story, *Cry* is the only play to stage the striking and impressive feature of Deirdre's cry from the womb that characterizes *Longes*, which occurs early in the story:

> The Ulaid were drinking at the house of Fedlimid son of Dall, Conchubur's storyteller, and Fedlimid's wife was standing over and serving, even though she was with child. . . . When it came time to sleep, Fedlimid's wife rose to go to her bed, but as she crossed the house the child in her womb screamed so that it was heard throughout the court.
>
> (Gantz 257)

Woods makes the cry of unborn Deirdre a catalyst in his own revisitation of the story, and the title *A Cry from Heaven* highlights a structural, stylistic, and strategic choice in dramatic terms. He also programmatically explained the reasons for his title:

> That title comes from what for me is one of the most extraordinary images . . . before she is born, Deirdre is heard to cry in her mother's womb . . . the image of the unborn child calling out to life . . . is an extraordinary image . . . . And, in the play, that cry becomes a cry down to the present, and in a sense it's a cry of grief for all life and all death.
>
> (Bastos 116)

In fact Deirdre's cry, occurring in act 1, scene 2, is magnified in a variety of ways, it is multiplied and resonates throughout the play, thus providing structural unity. Unity is also given by the imagery of fire which opens the play in the stage directions and recurs in the characters' speech. The animal imagery of bulls, deer, birds recalls the animal imagery of *Longes* (Tymoczko, Jones). The imagery of stones and rocks is reminiscent of the gory death of Deidre, who dashes her head against a rock in *Longes*, but also of the magic power of stones in the Celtic world (Quinn 16).

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And if the original story of Deirdre in its different versions is in many ways a palimpsest (Herbert, "The Universe" 53), *Cry* has a mixed nature: it is both a pre-text, an intertext, and an after-text. The prequel of *Longes* is cast into a five-act format, which makes it close to a classical or a Shakespearean tragedy, traditionally focusing on the destruction of kings. In this line, political intrigue is given prominence in the real or imagined plots Conor and Ness see develop around them in the form of actions, intentions, or thoughts of other characters. The play also exploits intertextually elements from *Oidhe Chloinne Uisneach*; for example, in act 4, scene 4 Naoise dreams of three birds coming from Emain Macha with three drops of honey in their beaks, leaving the honey behind and going away with three drops of blood—honey being Fergus's message and blood the three sons of Usna. Notably, Woods twists and reverses the incident, as it is Naoise who has the dream rather than Deirdre, the woman of vision in *Oidhe*.

Some of the works of the Revival are also cryptically present in the stage directions or in dialogue. For example, the fire imagery that opens the play on the night of Samhain "keep[s] intertextuality with Yeats's *Deirdre*," graphically representing Conor's desire for Deirdre (Sakauchi 9). In a similar way in act 4, scene 4, Deirdre is "working on a tapestry" (74), which recalls the "half-finished piece of tapestry" in John Millington Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (171). And in act 1, scene 2, the use of the verb "to grip" when baby Deirdre "grips (Conor's) finger and she smiles" (Woods 16) recalls a similar incident occurring in James Stephens's novel *Deirdre*, where "[t]he babe reached with a tiny claw and gripped one finger of the king" (Stephens 7).

Cry is also an after-text. Taking some liberties with the source material, Vincent Woods develops the story beyond the death of the Sons of Usna and Deirdre's suicide, providing the play with his own alternative conclusion. Deirdre gives birth to a boy, Naoise's son, whom Conor thinks is his own. Soon after the birth of the baby and Naoise's death, Deirdre kills herself offstage: "Exit Deirdre to throw herself to death from the battlement onto the rocks" (108). Here Woods provides a personal variation to the version of *Longes* in the Book of Leinster, in which Deirdre "let her head be driven against (a boulder), and the boulder made fragments of her head and she died" (Gantz 267). The hope represented by the newborn baby is soon lost when Leabharcham, Deirdre's foster mother, kills him rather than letting Conor murder the baby himself.

Woods thus works on the expansion of the pre-text, providing open references to the epic of *Táin*, to which the story belongs to. In particular, this appears in the strange Samhain ritual of the fight between the Bulls of

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Night and Day shedding light on the macrotext of the tale of the *Cattle Raid*, which recounts the war to obtain the Brown Bull of Cooley. On this occasion, in act 1, scene 2, the stage directions implicitly cast a bridge to *Táin* through the use of props: "*Enter Cathach. Two cages are brought in, each containing a huge sphere, one gold, one milky-grey silver. Or maybe the spheres are simply rolled in*" (Woods 6). The spheres, each containing one man disguised as a bull, are not only traditional symbols of perfection, but also effective visual and extratextual reminders of the unity of *Táin*. And, in a strong metadramatic impact of playacting and of a play-within-a-play, act 4 opens with a "*mock bullfight*" (64) acted out by Ardan and Ainle, Naoise's brothers, encouraged by Deirdre herself: "*the two brothers/bulls bellow, glare at each other, attack, clash heads, retreat . . . paw the ground*" (64). The play also closes with the bullfighting ritual: "*The Bulls of day and Night re-enter, blood-stained, battered. They face each other, embrace, kiss; the Bull of Night kills the Bull of Day. They lie down together*" (114). In a reversal of the initial bullfight, in which Conor kills the Bull of Night, a sort of balance is redressed as the story comes to a full circle.

Woods also expands the cast, adding the character of Ness, Conor's mother, who does not originally appear in any of the various versions, and giving more space to the character of Fergus, who in the play tries to act as an element of balance between the extremes of both Conor and Ness. Ness in particular is a domineering and powerful character: she manipulates her son Conor through the power of words. In act 1, scene 1, she speaks immediately after the King, providing her own version of past events, which sheds light on her authority, and she is also the first to support the words of the prophecy and be in favor of killing Deirdre with a brief and sharp use of a passive voice: "it must be done" (13). Later on, in act 3, scene 5, Fergus openly and accusingly states the responsibility of Ness's words in the tragic development of the story: "See what her words have done" (61). Furthermore, Ness uses a magic formula in act 3, scene 3, while performing a sort of pagan ritual "before some pre-Christian image or altar; maybe using cursing stones" (53). Like a witch or a sorceress in contact with the underworld, Ness invokes the elements casting a spell and cursing Deirdre and Naoise:

> Sun burn them up
> Earth dig a grave for them
> Moon pull the sea
> Onto the rocks for them

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Night hide the way
Darkness be guide to them
Shorten their day
Skin be a shroud for them
Skin be a shroud to them
Shorten their day
. . . (53-54)

The pattern is then reversed, as the formula goes backwards from "Skin" to "Sun" in a full circle. This is emphasized by the lack of punctuation, which provides compactness to the paratactic phrases in the breathless continuous utterance, and the choice of extremely short words is meant to destabilize the world of Deirdre and Naoise by destabilizing language. In a similar way, the repetition of the word "rock" anticipates Deirdre's suicide from the battlement and recalls her violent death in *Longes*.

Here Deirdre's cry from the womb is the first of a series of speech acts that characterize the story. In her study of the reading of early Irish saga, Ann Dooley points out that in *Longes*, "all the elements of the story, character and plot, are bound by the prominence of the various workings of 'words' of all kinds" as the promise or word given makes action "a horizontal linking series of mutually exclusive 'words'" (155) and is built around a variety of speech acts, prophecies, oaths, taboos, or *geasa*, laments, or *caointe*. Though the cry is not always present in the variety of versions, folklore renditions, and later remakes, it turns out to be a structuring principle Woods maintains and explores. In act 1, cry and prophecy are tightly connected, the cry from the womb is expanded in the prophecy, thus following the plot of *Longes mac N-Uisleann*. Here the druid Cathach decodes the cry that belongs to an unknown system of signs: first he says the girl to be born will be of great beauty, and because of her "there will be great slaughter among the chariot-warriors of Ulaid" (Gantz 258). He then names the girl ("Derdriu" 259) and finally proclaims the permanence and eternity of her story: "Yours will be a famous tale, Derdriu" (Gantz 259).

If Deirdre's entrance into her story through her cry is traumatic (Herbert, "Celtic Heroine" 17), so is the prophecy, and the two are interdependent. Prophecy is "word from nowhere" (Dooley 156), just like Deirdre's scream, which comes "from what is yet unborn" (Woods 10), from the liminal world "between flesh and bone" (12), so both are arbitrary words. The prophecy—the "totally omniscient word" (Dooley 156)—prescribes the narrative. Deirdre's story is generated by and develops according to a fatal

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prophecy, the authority of which pre-exists the language of its verbalization, and the plot follows a process of "filling in" (Quin 55). The prophecy is word *per se*, and so is Deirdre's scream: "raw undifferentiated human sound below the level of articulation" (Dooley 156). The plot that follows is thus preset, it is a preordained word, and in the play, a script within the script. Thus in *Cry*, Conor is an agent in the accomplishment of the prophecy through the authority of his words. In act 2, scene 3, he orders the three Sons of Usna to leave giving them "a month of ease to wander free in Ulster" (Woods 36); transforming the brothers from warriors to hunters, he opens the way to the meeting of Deirdre and Naoise. In this way Conor becomes responsible for the process of fulfilling the prescribed text of the prophecy, which—as Fergus says—is "made real by you and not by Deirdre" (69).

In act 1, scene 2, Woods magnifies Deirdre's original cry in a triple repetition, thus giving it greater resonance in terms of performance: "A cry is heard, a scream, a note unearthly, human, terrible," both supernatural and natural at the same time; "The cry is heard again," and then "[t]he loudest cry is heard" (9). In *Longes*, Cathach ritually examines the pregnant woman: "(he) placed his hand on the woman's womb and the child murmured" (Gantz 259), which leads to her naming Deirdre. In *Cry*, compression rather than expansion characterizes this scene, as Cathach simply "puts his hand on her belly. Listens" (Woods 11). Nevertheless, unlike in the legend, there is no murmur. However, by choosing for the play a title that does not coincide with the heroine's name, Woods actually offers a remake or rewriting of the name itself, derived from the verb *derdrithir*, to resound (Herbert, "The Universe" 57; Dooley 155-59), hence the heroine's name given as "troubler" or "alarm." Thus the paratextual element of the title is itself part of the prescribed text of the prophecy in act 1, scene 2. Cathach's prophecy also ends with the word "lament," an allomorph close to *derdrithir*, that is, to the meaning of Deirdre's name:

> This girl-child in the womb will be of beauty
> As cool as midnight moon, as hot as sun;
> The stars will scatter dusting for her journey
> And earth lament that journey, when it's done. (Woods 13)

The cosmic disorder embedded in these lines summarizes and rewrites the sparse formula of *Longes*, which develops instead in clearly distinguished parts (Gantz 258-59). In *Cry*, Cathach's words of vision are less formulaic than the prophecy in the Old Irish legend. In fact, in *Longes*,

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Cathach focuses on Deirdre's fame and beauty and the destruction she will cause, including the exile of the Sons of Usna and the death of various warriors, named one by one—"Conachur's son Fiachnae," "Gerrce son of Illadán," "Éogan son of Durthacht" (Gantz 259). In Woods's remake, the litany of names is replaced by the signs of Deirdre's destiny, visually described: Cathach sees three hunters, ostensibly the three sons of Usna, then he continues with the vision of "the muffled snow; / A deer, a raven, / The earth below all warm / with fallen flesh" (11), a variation based on alliteration of the three-color motif in *Longes* (Gantz 260), fire, "siegeful towns and rafters burning," betrayal and the destruction of the Red Branch. While the prophecy in *Longes* grants Deirdre the eternity of her story, in *Cry*, attention is cast on her name:

> Her name—Deirdre:
> That name remembered when we are long forgot.
> That name a warning—
> Kill her tonight. (Woods 13)

Fergus later on translates Deirdre's name more explicitly by juxtaposing name and prophecy: "woe is indeed / Her name and purpose" (15), thus implicitly suggesting that Deirdre's name is her story.

Identifying the cry as a catalyst, Woods expands it on several occasions so that it reverberates and resounds throughout the play, usually highlighting that something relevant is going to occur. Therefore a mysterious cry marks the meeting of Deirdre and Naoise in act 3, traditionally the turning point in a tragedy. According to stage directions, scene 2 opens on the "*sound of hunting horn*"—which is repeated in act 4, scene 1 and reiterated three times in scene 6—and continues with a cry, described as "*a mingling of Deirdre's pre-birth cry and the cry of a deer*" (50-51). Such superimposition recalls the early attempt to decode and interpret Deirdre's cry as an animal sound in act 1, scene 2—"a wolf or stag," "an animal" (9)—but also echoes Deirdre's dream of a deer in act 3, scene 1. According to the stage directions, a death cry may be heard in act 5, scene 5, when Deirdre throws herself onto the rocks off stage (108), and references to the cry are intensified and seem to concentrate at the end of the play. Here, Fergus considers the development of the play in retrospection:

> So well she might have cried, Deirdre
> From her mother's womb—

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Cried for what she knew would come
From such cracked and sullied pledges. (113)

The verbal overtone and the solemn formula of oath and promise embedded in the noun "pledge" explicitly recall the destruction announced by the prophecy in the choice of adjectives ("cracked," "sullied"). In this way Fergus's words suggest and reiterate the interdependence of cry and prophecy, authoritative words in their foreboding. As word from nowhere, Deirdre's cry from the womb is also an expression of protest or rebellion against the fate of her prescribed story, a catalyst of life and death at the same time. Significantly, the cry is heard immediately after Conor kills the Bull of Night, so in the organization of the play this first cry is a reaction or an act of resistance to Conor's violent act of power.

The play closes with Leabharcham's enticement to the people of Ulster to "give a single cry . . . to this passing" (114) while the Bulls of Day and Night now "lie down together" (Woods 114) in final reconciliation.

In a similar way, references to stories and storytelling gradually increase and intensify towards the end on the play. Unlike *Longes*, the prophecy gives immortality to Deirdre's name and not to her story (13). This instead appears in Fergus's open reference in act 2, scene 3. Speaking of the people of Ulster's discontent with Conor's authoritative, unruly, and lavish behavior, he emphasizes what remains of the prophecy:

They know the *stories* of her:
Cathach's *words* of omen
Haven't lessened in the *telling*.
They think she'll bring destruction with her. (39, emphasis added)

Moreover, reference to the story explicitly appears at the end of the play, to give Deirdre's story permanence and stability. In act 5, scene 4, just before killing herself, Deirdre asks Leabharcham to tell her baby the story of his parents:

Take him far away:
Rear him as you reared me.
Let him know our story,
Let him know of Naoise and Deirdre,
The story of the sons of Usna
And how they were betrayed. (107)

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The repetition of the word "story" shows Deirdre's awareness of being a story or of having become a story destined to remain in time. This recalls Deirdre's wish to have her story survive in W. B. Yeats's play, *Deirdre*. Turning to the Musicians, Deirdre first asks the "singing women" to "set [her story] down in a book" (Yeats 190), then she insists that they "have Deirdre's story right" (194). Vincent Woods emphasizes and magnifies this kind of self-awareness throughout his play. In contrast with act 5, scene 4, Ness brutally comments on the issue of story-telling imagining a different outcome in scene 5: "Had you been pitched, / A screeching infant from this battlement, / Our story would be different now" (112). Overlapping the story of Deirdre and her baby, whose life, like his mother's, is predestined at birth, Ness gives the would-be story some kind of verbal resonance. She overlaps the act of killing the baby by throwing him from the battlement with his sound: the verb "to pitch" also evokes the level of high sound of the primeval cry, while "screeching" is an adjective she has previously used with reference to Deirdre in act 1, scene 3, calling her "a screeching thing":

> How could you see her spared,
> A bitchling hardly born,
> A screeching thing whose life may be our ruin. (18)

Fergus follows Ness's pattern of speech calling Deirdre "That squealing thing":

> That squealing thing you wanted dead
> Might yet be our best future. (18)

Thus Deirdre is depersonalized and dehumanized, further declining from animal to thing, which is consistent with Ness's pattern of destruction and suppression in the play.

Deirdre's awareness of the story is also embedded in the tapestry she weaves in act 4, scene 4. In the stage directions, Deirdre is said to be "*working on a tapestry, which she later rips apart*" (74). In an apparent demand of freedom from the confinement of female chores, Deirdre implicitly refers to the text of her story she is weaving and is ready to destroy: ". . . is this what I was born for? / To weave and loom and loom and weave / And stitch and darn and sew" (75). Different levels of meaning are superimposed in these lines, the reference to her fate, and, therefore, to the words of the prophecy, is juxtaposed to Deirdre's activity of weaving and sewing, therefore, to the

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making of a text. Hers is a story she is also ready to destroy as the reference to ripping apart implies, a visual counterpart to her first cry of alarm and protest.

The action of creation and destruction is similarly intensified in the increasing repetition of the verb "to do" in different forms often related to the process of doing and undoing and further intensified as the play progresses and reaches its end. "Have you no heed / For what you've done?" (50), Cathach says to Leabharcham after she has revealed Naoise's identity to Deirdre; at the end of act 3, Fergus comments that there is "No joy now from wishing acts undone" (63); in act 4, scene 3, Felim wishes he could "undo the years" and be a real father to Deirdre (70); at the end of act 4, scene 6, Deirdre expresses her sorrow thinking of the past and of the future: ". . . I can't undo / What's done or is to be" (86-87); at the end of act 4, Noaise tells Cathach "your work is done" (93). In act 5, scene 3, Ness considers Fergus responsible for having "written our undoing / In the bloodied snow" (104); in scene 5, Cathach admits, "Now all is done," which has an echo in Ness's "Done" and a further echo in Fergus's "Done." All of these instances occur quite close to each other, in a way running after each other (113), emphasizing that the process of fulfilling the prophecy has concluded. Such accumulation of verbal forms of doing and undoing is also an oblique textual reminder of the play's text itself, which is deconstructing and reconstructing an ancient story. From this point of view some of the liberties Woods takes with the original sources in his after-text mark an innovative stance: what is missing is as relevant as what is present.

In *Cry*, words of honor become increasingly frequent as the play progresses. For example, in act 4, Fergus brings a message "of hope" and he "place(s) (his) honour" before Deirdre and Naoise, who in turn are "honour-bound" to go with him (83). The word given in public is binding (O'Leary 17), and in the context of the play this rewrites the Old Irish *geis* or taboo which is relevant at different stages in *Longes*. Interestingly, Deirdre's binding words when first meeting Naoise do not appear in the play, or, rather, take a different wordless turn. In *Longes*, Deirdre forces Naoise to go away with her: "Two ears of shame and mockery these unless you take me away with you" (Gantz 261). In *Cry*, the lyrical language used by the lovers when they first meet is sharply contrasted by the violent action of Deirdre, who inexplicably "maims or cuts Naoise" (51), a wordless visual rewriting of the *geis*.

Likewise, in *Cry*, the *caoineadh*, or keening, the piercing loud lamentation for the dead that has such a relevant role in most versions of the legend, does not appear. An expression of personal and collective grief, a

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composition half-way between prescribed formula and personal creativity, the *caoineadh* belongs traditionally to the woman who mourns for "a dead husband, relative or nursling" (Bromwich 247), thus giving vent to the sorrow of loss. A standard poetic genre linked to a standard occasion (O'Coileáin 97), the *caoineadh* finds its place half-way between inarticulated expression and poetic composition. Angela Bourke defines it as a "high-pitched moan," a "cry without words," a "stylized sobbing and wailing" (72), which is realized also as a verbal composition (O'Coileáin 103).

Both in *Longes* and in *Oidhe*, Deirdre's lament over Naoise's body or for the Sons of Usna can be seen as an extension or a counterpart of the verbal activity embedded in her cry. What appears to be as close as possible to a keen is Naoise's nostalgic description of the natural beauty of Ulster in act 5, scene 1, indulging on "endless" skies, "The way the land rolls back / And opens out," the "Swift rivers full of trout" (100). In the same scene, however, Deirdre repeats three times a sort of formula: "This is where it ends" (94), in the space of relatively few lines. The first time this phrase turns out to be a moment of vision and anticipation of betrayal: "This is where it ends, / the table laid / For death to have its fill" (94). Next, it sounds like an echo of a death toll between Naoise and his brother Ardan's words. Finally it occurs just before "[a] knocking is heard" (95), announcing Leabharcham's arrival as the Sons of Usna prepare for battle. Obsessively repeated to replace an absent keen, in self-awareness and self- reflection of the story, the sentence "This is where it ends" also marks the end of Deirdre's story.

In *A Cry from Heaven*, Woods turned to the Celtic past of legend and oral and written tradition to tell once again a story that has been repeatedly told throughout the centuries. Taking liberties with the original texts, he provided his own personal reading of a pre-text, and the resulting after-text shows novelties and innovations that still respect some of the forms pertaining to the old legend. His focus on the cry from heaven, both an omen and a personal expression of grief, draws attention to one of the most emblematic features of the oldest version of the story so far neglected in theatrical remakes. Woods thus exploits the theatrical potential of the cry from nowhere, which allows him to emphasize and give new forms to the verbal quality of the story itself.

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Note

[1] Since the spelling of Old Irish names varies considerably, in this essay I use the spelling used in the play as standard; when quoting from other sources I will respect the spelling given.

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