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Preserving the Dignity of the Irish in "Translations"

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Beyond linguistic imperialism and the rupture of identity, the British practice of translating Irish names to English (Anglicization) in *Translations* by Brian Friel is an example of insulting persons' dignity while simultaneously denying a universal right. In northern Ireland in 1833, specifically near Baile Beag, *Translations* depicts the Anglicization of names through a hedge school. Hugh is the teacher of the hedge school, with his younger son Manus occasionally filling in. The school is interrupted as Owen, Hugh's older son, returns as a member of the British cartographer team that is mapping and translating the town names into English from Gaelic. In addition to the town names, Owen's name has also been translated as the British call him "Roland." Yolland, Owen's partner in translating, eventually describes the Anglicization of names as "an eviction of sorts," as Yolland, concerned with his role in translating, finds himself drawn to the Irish people and culture (Friel 52). Directly disobeying orders to translate, Yolland and Roland decide to write the Gaelic name "Tobair Vree" in their record of official translations called the Name Book, instead of writing an English translation (Friel 54). Then, despite an initial acceptance of his new name, Roland reclaims the dignity of being called Owen, taking a stand against the renaming (Friel 54). Owen is not the only one to have his individual dignity insulted, as the names of many towns undergo translations. The translation of Irish names is a radical transformation that injures dignity and denies the universal right to call by name in Friel's *Translations*, though the threat which translations pose can be deterred by preserving the Gaelic language.

Due to the focus of *Translations* on the conflict between the British and the Irish, it is important to note the religious historical background that contributed to the clash. The first traces of the early church in Ireland are noted to be in 432 A.D. when Saint Patrick arrived in Ireland as a Catholic missionary and began sharing the Gospel ("Church of Ireland"). Aspects of preexisting Irish culture were absorbed into church communities such as seasonal holidays, provided they were not in contradiction with the Gospel ("Church of Ireland"). Hundreds of years later, King Henry VIII was declared head of the Church of England in 1534, responding to the Pope's refusal to grant him an annulment of marriage ("Church of Ireland"). In 1536, Irish Parliament declared King Henry VIII the head of the Church of Ireland and he remained theologically Catholic, though his successors marked the introduction of Protestantism through the Church of Ireland, the state approved religion ("Church of Ireland"). The split between Protestants and Catholics was the Reformation, though Protestant and Catholic both remain denominations of Christianity (Sahgal 2017).

Tensions between Protestants and Catholics grew in Ireland until the first eruption in the form of a Catholic rebellion against Protestant colonizers from the United Kingdom (U.K.) in 1798. Then, the Act of Union made Ireland a part of the U.K. in 1800, erasing Parliament in Dublin and creating more strict control of

the Irish Catholics. The U.K. also passed the Education Act in 1831, creating national schools that taught in English rather than Gaelic. *Translations* takes place in 1833, nestled among the tensions of religious and linguistic conflict rooted in one nation oppressing another. Over 100 years later, Friel wrote *Translations* in 1980 during The Troubles, a cycle of violence with the Catholic Nationalists and Irish Republican Army wanting to break free from the U.K., against the Protestant Unionists/Loyalists who, backed by the Crown, wanted to remain under U.K. rule. In 1921, Northern Ireland was established as one of the four countries of the U.K., with the rest of Ireland establishing independence. In 1980, the contentious play centered on the conflict between Ireland and the U.K. premiered in Northern Ireland, specifically in Derry in the Guildhall, which had ties to Protestantism, at the height of The Troubles. Though the play was performed in the Protestant Guildhall where actors may have been Protestant, the 1833 characters would have presumably been Catholic. The religious tension, though not directly referenced in *Translations*, are important context for the conflict between the British and Irish.

Using a Christian lens that encompasses both Protestant and Catholic beliefs demonstrates the intrinsic dignity signified in a name. Although religious tensions between the two added to the British and Irish conflict, it is important to note one similarity that Protestants and Christians share- their belief in the dignity of names. Both denominations recognize the importance of being called by name. McArdle, who analyzes the act of one calling another by their name, argues that persons become more fully who they are through relational interactions such as using a name (McArdle 220). The significance of calling by name is further demonstrated by the following example of Isaiah 43:1-2 in *The Revised New Jerusalem Bible*:

¹And now, thus says the LORD,
he who created you, Jacob,
who formed you, Israel:
“Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name, you are mine.
²Should you pass through the waters,
I shall be with you;
or through rivers, they will now swallow you up.
Should you walk through fire,
you will not suffer,
and the flame will not burn you.”

Here, God’s intimate concern for the individual is demonstrated by His use of their name (McArdle 221). God has also renamed Jacob, which meant deceiver, to Israel, meaning “strives with God.” As Israel would become the father to twelve

sons, with each son leading a tribe of the Israel nation, Israel was a name suited to his mission. In addition to divine and interpersonal interactions, the use of names ties each individual, the caller and the called, more closely to each other. Furthermore, the name of "LORD" in all capitals signifies the true name of Him, not Lord, God or the Almighty. His true name is too revered to be spoken or written, so it is symbolized in this manner (McArdle 225). With such dignity and respect intertwined in a name, and as each person is created equal with an individual right to dignity and name, one must be careful to consider the impacts of misusing, rather than genuinely using, names.

The importance of the name to the individual is demonstrated in *Translations* as one individual is referred to as "Owen" by his family and hometown, while he is referred to as "Roland" by his British employers. According to McArdle, name changes in *The Revised New Jerusalem Bible* signify genuine and radical transformations to better fit a person for their mission, as seen in the previous example of Jacob's transformation to Israel (225). In another example, the shepherd Abram became Abraham when God called him to be the father of the people of Israel, with the new name fitting the new calling. Abram means father, while Abraham means father of multitudes. Abraham would become the father of Jacob/Israel. In contrast, while the name "Owen" underwent a major translation, it was neither genuine nor a better fit for his work on the cartography team. In fact, when Owen eventually reveals his true name to Yolland, the two are overcome with emotions that manifest in uncontrollable laughter (Friel 55). Owen's relationship with Yolland was built on false pretenses, specifically a false name. As Owen had spent years being called by the wrong name and Yolland had spent years calling Owen the wrong name, Owen's dignity had suffered insult. Yolland's dignity had also suffered as he was not trusted with Owen's true name. The two do not know how to react to this offense, as evidenced by their being overcome with absurdity at the revelation of Owen's real name (Friel 55). The process of naming and calling by name is integral to the formation of human relationships and the dignity of the person.

In another example that highlights the relationship between dignity and names, Nellie Rudah has a baby whose christening takes place during the play, though off stage. Despite the christening the baby's name is never given, though potential names are discussed. The first mention of the baby is by Sarah who mimes the act of rocking the baby, explaining without words that Hugh is at the christening (Friel 7). In response, Manus says it should not take all day to put a name on a baby (Friel 7). The second mention of the baby is brought on by Bridget (Friel 13). Though no one knows the father's name aside from Nellie, she is said to be naming the baby after their father at the christening (Friel 13). The group at the hedge school says that there are many anxious men in the area on the day of the christening, with one joking to another that it may be named after him

(Friel 13). Here, the lack of a name is used as a tool to insult the illegitimate child and his or her mother, a clear violation of dignity. Even after Hugh returns from the christening, the name of the baby is not given. The christening would be when the child received a new, Christian name, as a symbol of cleansing and rebirth. The baby's name is never used or given in the text, even though a member of the hedge school was at the christening to know the name, another insult to the baby's dignity. Even the Irish themselves fall victim to using a name to insult the dignity of another Irish person, the baby. A few days after the christening, Maire mentions that the baby dies and goes to the wake, and the name of the baby is still not given (Friel 73). Being given a name means there was inherent dignity in the baby, but other Irish people not using the name tarnishes the dignity that the baby was given.

Adding to the argument of the power of naming, Abel et al. explore a case study of slavery and colonization in the Danish West Indies. The authors argue that the power of naming is most obvious when it is used with its opposite intent of injury rather than its genuine purpose of individuation (Abel et al. 333). For example, enslaved persons were forced to respond to a name imposed by their masters rather than their name given at birth, and the authors argue that this practice forced said enslaved persons to acknowledge their own powerlessness and inferiority (Abel et al. 339). Though Owen was not enslaved, he was forced to respond to a name that was not his own, suggesting that he, as an Irish person, was in a state of inferiority as compared to the British. The damage that this caused was evident in the uncontrollable fit of laughter which Owen and Yolland burst into at the revelation of Owen's real name. The two did not know how to react to this injury, and their raucous laughter ended up being the default coping mechanism they resorted to using in an attempt to avoid processing the insult to dignity.

The dignity inherent to names expands beyond person-to-person interaction to include the names of locations. This is clear as Yolland and Roland work to translate Bun na hAbhann. Owen reveals that Bun is the Irish word for bottom and Abha means river, so this place is at the mouth of the river (Friel 39). While Yolland wants to leave this location name alone because there is no English equivalent, Owen continues to work and comes up with "Burnfoot" for the name of that area (Friel 40). Even though there is no indication that Burnfoot signifies the mouth of the river, it sounds similar to the Irish Bun na hAbhann. Burnfoot replaces the Irish with a simple English signifier, erasing the meaning of bottom and river from the location name. Bun na hAbhann was a name the English found to be not simple enough or unpronounceable, and thus it was entered into the Name Book as Burnfoot, an insult to the geographical history and dignity inherent in Bun na hAbhann. Burnfoot is just the beginning of the translations as Druim Luachra becomes Black Ridge, Druim Dubh becomes Dromduff, and Poll na

gCaorach becomes Sheepsrock (Friel 41-51). The renaming goes so far that Owen worries Hugh will not be able to find his way to Lis na Muc, a nearby town that has been translated to Swinefort (Friel 51). Owen indicates that Hugh must accept the English translations in order to navigate his own homeland, adding insult to the injury of translation.

In contrast to the focus on names, Hawkins, another theorist, makes an argument that is centered around her belief that Friel's play demonstrates that the real threat to Irish identity is not linguistic and cannot be combated by preserving the Irish language (Friel 25). Hawkins argues that English, not Irish, is the tool for the Irish to regain control and survive (26). At the same time, Hawkins acknowledges that the act of renaming is a metaphorical translation of ownership of the places renamed (25). In *Translations*, the renaming of each town symbolizes the ownership moving to the British out of Irish hands. Though she recognizes some adverse impacts of Anglicizing names, such as this translation of ownership, Hawkins fails to consider the depth of meaning in the names. Not just an act of military imperialism and takeover, translating the names erases meaning and history that is integral to Irish culture and dignity. For example, Yolland and Roland consider the crossroads which the Irish call "Tobair Vree." "Tobair" means "a well" and "Vree" is a corruption of the name "Brian," a man who is said to have drowned in the well (Friel 53). The well was a hundred yards from the crossroads, though it has since dried up (Friel 53). Renaming Tobair Vree would erase the story of Brian and the well, which Yolland and Roland realize. Subsequently, Yolland writes Tobair Vree in the Name Book that is supposed to have been translated, preserving the ties to the story. This moment exemplifies the importance of denying the radical transformation of Tobair Vree that would eliminate the right of the Irish to call to mind their own history and culture.

Having established the dignity inherent in a name, it is vital to recognize the potential impact of the continued use of Gaelic. Abel et al. explain that, out of earshot of their masters, some enslaved persons would use different names than the ones assigned by their masters, suggesting there was covert resistance within the ongoing complicity of still responding to a name given by a master (339). The resistance in *Translations* is less covert as Owen eventually reveals his true name boldly and is accepted by Yolland after their fit of uncontrollable laughter (Friel 55). In another example, after Owen shares his fear that Hugh will not be able to find his way to Lis na Muc which has been translated to Swinefort due to the translations of all the names in the area, Hugh still walks out and goes on his way (Friel 52). As Hugh returns by the end of the play, it is clear that even if he was a bit confused, he was still able to navigate his homeland, not having any knowledge of the English translations of names (Friel 85). Hugh proves that his native tongue is more than sufficient in navigating as there is inherent dignity in continuing to use the given names of places, refusing to give in to the English.

Finally, the heart of McArdle's argument is that the act of 'calling' by name is never a statement, but "always a question, an invitation" (231). It is an invitation to dialogue and to engagement, calling forth another (McArdle 231). Owen invites Yolland to a true, deeper dialogue by using his true name. The Irish can maintain a resistance to the translational insult to their collective dignity by continuing to use Gaelic town names, demonstrating the invitation to recall and maintain their own culture. The threat posed by translating Gaelic names to English can be deterred by continuing to use Gaelic as this recognizes the inherent dignity in a name and maintains the personal, cultural, and historical significance symbolized by the Gaelic names.

Debate about the translations of names continues in the prominent example of Derry-Londonderry in Ireland today. Catholic Nationalists generally prefer the city to be called Derry, while typically Protestant Unionists call the city Londonderry. Derry comes from the word "Daire," which means "oak grove." The earliest references to the town being called Derry date back to the 6th century, when a monastery was established there. In 1613, King James I added London to Derry when the city was granted its British royal title. The prefix "London" is seen by some as a sign of British heritage; Derry is seen as Irish heritage. Opposition to the name Londonderry stems from its ties to British colonialism and repression, thus insulting the dignity of the town and its citizens. Violence in Derry-Londonderry regarding the name conflict ceased with The Troubles in the 1990s, though the town is still referred to by some as Derry and others as Londonderry today. Although Derry is not the Irish name, it is the traditional name that has been used for centuries by the townspeople and thus holds significant cultural value. Continuing to use the town name of Derry is an example of how the Irish can continue to maintain their own culture today.

The dignity of names is evident in the portrayals of naming disputes in *Translations*. For instance, the translation of Owen to Roland, and then back to Owen, causes Owen and Yolland both to explode with laughter out of absurdity at the situation. Nellie Rudah's baby, having received a name at the christening, never has his or her name revealed in *Translations*, even though he or she is a person created with equal right to a name and inherent dignity. However, the most significant insult to the dignity of names is the translation of Gaelic to English, specifically evident in the example of Bun na hAbhann. In an act of resistance to injuring the dignity of Irish persons, Yolland and Owen write "Tobair Vree" in the Name Book, without an Anglican translation. The two recognize the history and cultural significance represented by the name and choose to respect its dignity by continuing to use Tobair Vree. Still, Tobair Vree is the exception to the rule of translating. Most other names are given an English translation, to the point where Owen suggests his own father may not be able to navigate his homelands without knowing the English words. In an act of defiance and resistance, Hugh proves he

can navigate with his mother tongue. By resisting the injury to dignity and powerlessness translations to English cause, dignity is preserved in the continued use of the Gaelic language.

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