

# 20

Carlow University MFA in Creative Writing Program  
20th Anniversary Anthology

**CARLOW**  
UNIVERSITY  
*Dedicated to the Future of You.*

**MFA in**  
**Creative Writing**

# From Ireland

by James Heaney

*God's bodkin! ... Use every man  
after his desert, and who should scape whipping?*

These are among my favourite lines from Shakespeare. They're spoken in Act II, Scene ii, of the Bard's most famous play. A troop of actors has just arrived to Elsinore Castle, and Hamlet – a devotee of theatre, and something of a writer himself – has instructed that they should be “well used” (well treated) during their stay there. Polonius, however, has replied that he will “use” the actors “according to their desert”; a cheeky response for a councillor to make to a prince, and one which earns him the above-quoted rebuke.

I like the egalitarian underpinnings of Hamlet's put-down: it isn't just the actors who'd suffer if the world were run along Polonius' lines (which of course it is) – we all would. I also like the equanimity of the sentiment, which serves as a sobering counterpoint to the beautiful, but at times hubristic, eulogy that the troubled prince offers a little earlier in the play. In his famous “What a piece of work is a man” soliloquy, Hamlet refers to humans as angelic, God-like even. In this exchange with Polonius, however, he brings us down to earth with a postlapsarian bump. Humans are far from perfect, angelic or God-like; Hamlet recognises here. Judged on the basis of their behaviour – they deserve whipping!

I was surprised when these lines popped into my mind, uninvited, as I started writing this piece for the 20th anniversary anthology of the Carlow University MHA. What, after all, has a scene from a Renaissance-era drama set in Denmark got to do with a 21st century Creative Writing programme that moves between the U.S. and Ireland, and which focuses on the genres of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, rather than dramatic writing? Then I remembered Naomi Shihab Nye's advice to writers: “Start anywhere” when you begin your writing adventure. “Each thing gives us something else.” So I carried on.

Now that I've finished my mini-adventure, I think Hamlet's words are relevant in at least two related senses. The first has to do with the idea of hospitality. The disagreement between the prince and his councillor in Shakespeare's play turns on the question of how we should treat strangers who come knocking at our door looking for refuge. Hospitality is a vitally important aspect of the Carlow University MFA. That students feel welcome – "well-used" – when they come to Ireland (or Pittsburgh) for their residencies is as important an element of the programme as any other. Hospitality is the *sine qua non* of the whole project. Without it, the workshops, lectures and excursions, the literary readings and, most importantly of all, the creative writing programme is designed to foster, all falter.

The strangers in Shakespeare's drama are actors, a class of people who – let's not forget – were viewed with great suspicion in Renaissance-era Europe: as vagabonds; reprobates who might carry the plague-virus into your house if you let them enter it, and carry one of your sons or daughters out of it as they left. We probably shouldn't push comparisons to our MFA students *too far* in this respect, but it's certainly true that although drama doesn't form part of the official programme, we've had our fair share of it nonetheless, down the years, as the students and mentors who attended the Irish residencies at Carlow College, in particular, would attest.

The best of the drama in Carlow was tragic-comic in nature: the cold (communal) shower rooms in the spartan-like surroundings of Lennon House, kitchen-fires and 3 a.m. fire-brigade call-outs, automated college-gates that clanged unceremoniously shut just as last-orders were being called at The Irishman's, leaving students (and a few mentors) with a moral quandary worthy of the procrastinating Dane himself. I suspect, though, that most all of the students who underwent the 'Survivor'-like trials of those early residencies look back fondly on the experience, and the enduring friendships that were forged in that venerable old college.

The quality of the facilities certainly improved when we upped sticks and moved to St Angelas College in Sligo, Yeats's land of heart's desire, our 'digs' a mere stone's throw away from the Lake Isle of Innisfree itself; and then to Dublin, the noisy sounding-box that inspired all of Joyce's great works, where the programme has been blessed by Ali and Seoná's organisational prowess and supererogatory acts of hospitality.

A second way in which Hamlet's rebuke to his ungenerous councillor relates to these reflections has to do with the idea of mercy, the need for which is clearly implied in his dismissal of Polonius (and the world's) 'carrot-and-stick'-type authoritarianism. I don't think Hamlet is interested in mercy in the sense of forgiveness for offences committed. That's more King Lear's 'bag'. It is, rather, mercy as a kind of life-ethic that attracts him; mercy as a compassionate attitude of mind, one which has little to do with the question of whether people actually deserve compassion or not.

It's an outlook that's predicated on a recognition that we are all flawed or 'damaged goods' in one way or another, and consequently none of us is in a position to judge (or perhaps even forgive) other human beings. "There's no point writing about a hero whose an angel", the Nigerian novelist (poet, and non-fiction writer), Chinua Achebe, once remarked. "It's not of any value to us, because we're not angels; but we can recognise a hero who has a flaw, and unless we are very stupid we know we have flaws." Our flaws – in so far as we can recognise them – help to make us human, and literature, as Achebe noted, helps us to do just that. There's a curious sense, also, in which they can serve as a catalyst for growth. It's through these cracks that the light gets in, as the prophet Cohen sang.

Mercifulness, in a literary context, isn't about being soft, or woke, or anti-woke, or any other ideological stance. It's about staying open to life when the easier option is to shut-up shop emotionally and intellectually. It's about staying attuned to "the music of what happens", as Seamus Heaney (magnifying lines from the old Irish sagas) wrote in his sonnet 'Song', even when that music makes us feel uncomfortable, inadequate, or 'undeserving' in Polonius' terms. It takes courage to *try* to live – and write – this way, "with wide-embracing love" as Emily Brontë put it in her poem 'No coward soul is mine' – more courage than it takes to fight.

I've seen this quality manifested many times at the Irish residencies; not only during the readings by mentors, guest-writers, and students that I've been privileged to attend (I'll resist the temptation to name my personal favourites or I'll still be writing by the time the 30th anniversary comes around), but also in terms of how our mentors engage with students, and their writings. As Carlo Gébler noted at our most recent residency in Dublin, the relationship between mentor

and writer is unlike any other kind of teacher/student dynamic because of its reciprocal nature. Everyone participating in a Carlow University creative writing workshop, or in a one-on-one session, is there as a learner rather than as an instructor and subordinate. Everyone involved in these classes errs from time to time. Everyone (to paraphrase Beckett's well-known lines): tries, fails, and tries again, in the confident expectation that they can "fail better." Nobody gets whipped! It's for these kinds of reasons -- and on account of the many enduring friendships it's brought my way -- that I look upon my involvement with this programme as the highlight of my professional life.

As we know, most of the 'music' that has happened over the last 20 years of the programme came to life under the always-attentive baton of our much-loved and sorely-missed, first Director, Ellie Wymard. Ellie was a 'one-off'. What she brought to the programme couldn't possibly be replicated. Tess Barry, however, has now brought her own effervescent personality and style to that role, and has already proved a more than capable successor. Tess brought us safely through the 'Covid years', and remained at her conductor's podium when the going got very tough again for her, personally, during last year's residency. The Carlow University MFA is in good hands. Whatever challenges the future brings, sound and effective leadership won't be found wanting. More music, Maestro, please!

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