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Women and Scarecrows: Marina Carr's Stage Bodies

In the context of Irish theatre in the early years of the twenty-first century, the theatre of Marina Carr occupies a unique position. For more than twenty years, Carr has been populating the Irish stage with a pageant of women. Her plays explore the dereliction of women within Irish culture, their relegation to positions of anger, frustration, and ultimately, death. In this essay, I will argue that her dramatic oeuvre amounts to a portrait of the maternal-feminine condition in Ireland at the end of the twentieth century, and that she is the first Irish playwright to deliver such a complete picture of Irish womanhood. I will begin by considering some trends in relation to the representation of women on Carr's stage, before going on to focus on the 2006 play *Woman and Scarecrow*. By considering Carr's plays largely from the perspective of the work of French philosopher Luce Irigaray on the repression of primary or maternal desire within Western culture, I will conclude that one of Carr's central concerns has been to show the struggle, for Irish women, to give expression to their creativity in ways other than within the maternal function. The disabling of female creative agency within Irish culture is therefore the true subject of her plays.

Each of Carr's heroines is associated with a place, usually a watery place. The attachment to land – a specific geographical site in rural Ireland – is strong, but it is a spiritual, rather than a mercenary or proprietorial attachment. These women are part of the landscape as the mythical characters of Greek or Celtic folklore were. The Mai is unable to leave Owl Lake; Portia Coughlan is wedded to the Belmont River, where her brother drowned; Hester Swane says she will die rather than leave the Bog of Cats, where her mother wandered at night, and where she now wanders. Catwoman is a mad and seemingly homeless woman

who lives on the bog and feeds off mice. She is of the Bog of Cats, and is redolent of it – she represents its dark, destructive power. Women, on Carr's stage, are located, therefore, in watery places, and because of their ineluctable containment within the maternal, these landscapes are redolent of the amniotic waters of uterine space.

This is is a world in which the dead mingle with the living (the voices and even the bodies of ghosts appear from time to time) – the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds are porous. There are numerous instances of metamorphosis in the plays, as characters such as Catwoman or Scarecrow become like animals; alternatively, animals and birds, such as the black swan in *By the Bog of Cats*, can be seen to acquire human characteristics. We first meet Hester Swane (*By the Bog of Cats*) as she drags a dead black swan by the neck –'Auld Black Wing. I've known her the longest time. We used play together when I was a young wan.' (Carr, 1998: 265) The name 'Swane' is no coincidence. Birds, in particular, are constant presences in the plays. Both swans and crows symbolise death and the afterlife in myth and folklore. In Celtic mythology, souls returning from the dead often took the shape of swans, and the swan had an association with the feminine, as fairy women took the form of swans. In Carr's plays, women are associated with the wildness and violence of nature, with owls, swans, crows, cats. The creatures evoked tend to have monstrous associations, often signifying death and loss, rather than ethereal beauty. Scarecrow in *Woman and Scarecrow* is one of the more intriguing characters in Carr's female bestiary. She appears as a woman for most of the play, but transforms into a frightening bird, having somehow merged with the 'thing' (beak, claws, feathers) that has been making noises in the wardrobe throughout the play. In the final scene, Scarecrow, whose task it was to keep death at bay, becomes the bird of death – 'regal, terrifying, one black wing,

cobalt beak, clawed feet, taloned fingers. Stands looking at Woman, shakes itself down' (Carr, 2006: 220) This crow, harbinger of death, is redolent of the Morrígan, a creature of Celtic mythology: a war goddess, bringing premonitions of a warrior's death, often appearing on the battlefield in the form of a crow, and taking the soul of the dead warrior to the underworld. For most of the play, Scarecrow appears to give scenic representation to Woman's psyche or emotions.

The picture of the world that emerges in plays such as *Woman and Scarecrow* or *By the Bog of Cats* is more akin to the Elizabethan world picture than to anything more contemporary. Here, the realms of heaven, earth and underworld are open to each other, and there is traffic between them. The blue virgin has 'her entourage of bird-men' (Carr, 2006: 192), and humans bear the names of angels. In *Portia Coughlan*, for example, Gabriel, who when alive, sang like an angel, has now become a ghost, wandering between heaven and earth, unable to depart. His sister, Portia, says she only married her husband, Raphael, 'because of his name, a angel's name, same as Gabriel's, and I thought be osmosis or just pure wishin' that one'd take on the qualities of the other.' (Carr, 1996: 210)

All of the plays explore death, and women are more strongly associated with death than men are in Carr's universe, as they are throughout culture, the womb functioning as both origin and end in the patriarchal imaginary. Each of Carr's heroines ends up dead, usually by suicide. Death is the only resolution that offers itself to them. Portia Coughlan drowns herself in the Belmont River in order to be with her beloved twin, Gabriel, who also drowned there some years earlier. The Mai drowns herself in Owl Lake. Even Woman, in *Woman and Scarecrow*, who appears to be dying of cancer, is said (by her aunt) to have

decided to die: 'I will not forgive this… […] this wilful jaunt to your doom.' (Carr, 2006: 182)

Woman and Scarecrow is the play that goes most fully into the matter of the woman's relationship with her own death, as its exclusive focus is the representation of a woman in her final hours of life. The play is a new departure for Carr in some respects. The absence of names is immediately striking – Him, Auntie Ah, Woman. This is surprising in light of the symbolic importance of names in Carr's work in general (Portia evoking the Shakespearean heroine, Hester Swane suggesting an association with swans, etc). This absence of nomination and indeterminacy of setting locate the play in a timeless, mythical context – woman is everywoman, albeit a very Irish everywoman. The structuring device is also unusual: there are apparently two women on stage – Woman and Scarecrow – but the spectator soon learns that they are both part of the same woman, so that the woman is in dialogue with herself. The nature of Scarecrow is not entirely clear, she may be Woman's mind, or her psychic super-ego or conscience. She pronounces, draws conclusions, judges. On the other hand, she describes herself as something that approaches the idea of the soul – 'I truly believed when I latched on to you before the weaver's throne, I truly believed that you and I would amount to something' (162), she says of the beginning of Woman's life. At another moment, Scarecrow describes herself as Woman's heart, commenting that when Woman had affairs, her 'heart wasn't involved. I wasn't allowed a look-in.' (167) Another possible reading of the split woman represented in the play is to view Woman and her alter ego, Scarecrow, as representative of the feminine-maternal divide within Western culture, a divide first evoked by Lacan, and explored in depth by feminist psychoanalysts such as Luce Irigaray. The female body in bits and pieces is suggestive of the Lacanian theory of the unconscious

maternal body; it also evokes the condition of the feminine in Western culture as a body in an ambivalent relationship with language and culture. I will return to this potential reading of Carr's work. Heart, soul – Scarecrow is an enigmatic figure on the stage who, I will argue, ultimately represents Woman's repressed creative instinct, which is closely associated with the life instinct in Freudian psychology.

All of Carr's heroines are mothers, and the mother-child relationship in the plays is almost always dysfunctional or imbalanced in some way. Mothers are often unavailable – too wrapped up with their men to be interested in their children (*The Mai*), or dying in childbirth (*The Mai*, *Woman and Scarecrow*). In some of the plays, mothers are actively hostile to their children, prostituting them or facilitating incest within the family (*On Raftery's Hill*), threatening infanticide (*Portia Coughlan*) or actually practising infanticide (*By the Bog of Cats*). The daughter is often shown by Carr to have remained attached to the mother as her primary object of love. Hester Swane, for instance, waits forty years for her mother to return to the bog, even though she knows this is impossible. Woman has retained one key memory from childhood, a memory which Scarecrow claims is a fabrication, or a false memory. It is a memory of being taken, at the age of seven or eight, by her heavily-pregnant mother to buy a new coat. After a long search, the mother finally found a red coat with black velvet buttons:

> […] it is how I see her now, her girth disappearing in dusty shadow, old before her time and still radiant, the white teeth flashing, the russet gold of her hair and the expression in her eyes. I, in my new red coat and hat, gave her pleasure, pleasure beyond describing. For one brief moment, a mirror glance, I was the thing she had yearned for and found. (Carr, 2006: 185)

This account of the mother's body is a sensual one – the girl-become-woman remembers the first body she loved, that of the mother. Her greatest desire was to be the mother's sole object of desire. This, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, is the primary desire of all infants. French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray locates the founding loss of the mother's body in myth and history, and in psychoanalytical theories of the subject. In her essay, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', she refers to 'this first moment'[1] as *the* no-go area in Western culture. Referring to the Oresteian trilogy, she notes that the Greek myth seals the ascendancy of the Father's law with the burial of the Mother, her relegation to death and madness. The umbilical cord is the trace of a lost identity, prior to the name; it is the mark of a connection to a period of fusion prior to rupture or cutting. For it is the mother's body that is subsequently fractured, assimilated in bits and pieces – in psychoanalytical descriptions of early development, the infant fantasises different parts of the mother's body in isolation. Irigaray uses Lacanian imagery of early infantile development to point out that the mother's body *in culture* is a 'corps morcelé', a body in bits and pieces, fantasised mainly in terms of its gaping holes, its desire to devour, to draw the subject back to the death-bearing womb. 'The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the 'dark continent' par excellence. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell.' (Irigaray, 1991: 35) Because the sojourn *in utero* is censored by our culture and because the human subject's separations from this 'first home' (39) and first giver of nourishment remain uninterpreted, the concomitant losses and scars unconsidered, there is a refusal of mourning within culture of what is,

[1] Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', translated by David Macey, in *The Irigaray Reader,* edited by Margaret Whitford (Blackwell: Oxford, 1991), p.39. The original essay, 'Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère' was first published in *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), pp.21-33.

according to Irigaray, a crucial part of the self, the foundation of all structures of desire and identity. This is even more the case for women, who are required by culture simultaneously to repudiate and identify with a body that is the mirror-image of their own. Irigaray concludes, in contradiction of Freud, that Western culture is founded on the murder of the mother, her relegation to a secondary position, the 'burial' of her desire and of her anger (37). All of which repression leads to narcissistic disturbances and difficulties in relation to body-image and sexual desire for women within culture.

The radical nature of the repression of the relationship with the first body, and of primary desire, is the cause of the dereliction of women within culture, according to Irigaray. The extent of the loss that prohibition of the desire of the mother entails for women within culture, the inability to know, to understand the loss that has taken place, and subsequently to mourn it, has meant that the development of a separate sexual identity for women has been impossible. In the case of men, repression of the maternal has resulted in fear of the feminine, representation of female sexuality as voracious, threatening castration. The overall result is a lack of valid representation of female sexuality within culture, women whose subjective foundations are built on unknowable loss, and an imbalance of power between the sexes in a culture founded on extensive repression of the relationship with original desire.

Carr's plays explore the dereliction of women within (Irish) culture, their relegation to positions of anger, madness and ultimately, death. Each play examines different aspects of that dereliction, and the dysfunctional nature of family life and relationships between the sexes that results from it. The situation of women in Ireland has been controlled, to a large extent, by the presence and influence of the Catholic Church, and the views on female sexuality within that church. The Church continued to exert control over Irish

women's bodies throughout most of the twentieth century, despite improvements in women's living and working conditions. The history of twentieth-century Ireland is a history of incest, the sexual abuse of children within families and within institutions run by Church and State, as well as the abuse of women in their sexuality and in their maternity. Carr is perhaps the only playwright to have represented the feminine condition in Irish culture, from the woman's perspective, so consistently and in such detail. Incest is everywhere in Carr's stage universe. *On Raftery's Hill* is essentially about the incest within the Raftery family, perpetrated by the patriarch on his daughters Dinah, and later, the youngest, Sorrel. The girls' chance of an independent life away from him is destroyed, and both end up on the hillside, with their father. Brother-sister incest is at the centre of *Portia Coughlan* – Portia provides a graphic description of her love-making with her twin brother, whom she goes to join when she drowns herself in the river. She has never recovered from his drowning, and was not able to love another man. It emerges in the course of the play that the parents of Portia and Gabriel were also brother and sister.

In addition to incest, madness and suicide are the lot of women on Carr's stage. Her plays present a dramatic representation of Irigaray's theorisation of the madness of women. Noting that all desire is madness, Irigaray observes that 'one desire has chosen to see itself as wisdom, moderation, truth, and has left the other to bear the burden of the madness it did not want to attribute to itself, recognize in itself. (Irigaray, 1991: 35) She concludes that because the early relationship with the mother remains in the shadows of our culture ('it is the dark continent *par excellence*' [35]), it is a mad desire:

> The imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodily encounter with the mother… where are we to find them? In what darkness,

> what madness, have they been abandoned? [...] In the absence of any representation of it [...] the openness of the mother (ouverture de la mère), the opening on to the mother (ouverture à la mère), appear to be threats of contagion, contamination, engulfment in illness, madness and death. [...] (Irigaray, 1991: 39)

Marina Carr's dramatic representation of women's association with madness and death is one of the most distinguishing features of her theatrical production. The representation of death reaches its apogée in *Woman and Scarecrow*, where Death is in the wardrobe. Here, Carr is taking a serious risk, as there are strong overtones of the cartoon or comic-strip to this growling, winged creature lurking in the wardrobe, waiting to pounce. It is risky to have this non-realist element in a play that is apparently realist, in that it features two women in dialogue about the life of an ordinary woman. Whether the device of the creature in the cupboard works or not is debatable. One thing I would say is that there is humour in this play (Woman's passion for the music of Demis Roussos, whose 1973 hit 'My Friend the Wind' she insists on playing, very loud), and Carr may have been reaching for the *danse macabre*, the black humour that pokes fun at death, part of an ancient European tradition, which is, of course, common in other world traditions too. Perhaps we are meant to laugh every time Death growls or lets out a 'deep-throated guffaw', or pokes a feather or a claw from the wardrobe. Scarecrow warns Woman that 'He's in there now, making a bracelet out of infant ankle bones.' Certainly, the gallows humour serves to temper the ghoulishness of much of the content of the women's discussion, which features much relishing of gruesome details of decaying cadavers, the work of rats and worms on the body in the clay. Death is going to eat Woman, but her alter ego tells her that she 'did not eat the world', as she should have. Scarecrow, woman's creative impulse, wanted life to be epic, wanted to take risks, to take a chance on passion. It seems that Woman let her

head rule her heart, and opted for domesticity and a kind of false safety – Scarecrow calls it mediocrity. She suggests that if woman had followed her heart, she would not be dying so early in her life.

The stage world of Marina Carr is populated mainly by women, and women take all the leading roles in the plays. This is not an insignificant feature of her theatre, given the paucity of plays by and about women in the history of theatre. Her heroines are all imbricated in the negative stereotypes of femininity prevalent in the culture: the women on her stage are, variously, hags or crones, redolent of the witch, incestuous, mad, alcoholic, unfaithful to their husbands, abandoners or murderers of their own children. They are often tied to men they don't desire or love, or they are shown as daughters whose lives are dominated by their fathers. They are all dissatisfied with the lives they are living, yearning for something else, something they lost at some stage in their lives. To this extent, Carr does not idealise or empower the women she places centre-stage: instead, she uncovers and highlights the *status quo*, the way things are. By unpicking the dark, and sometimes bloody seam of women's lives in rural Ireland, she foregrounds the disavowed grief in relation to the maternal at the core of womanhood in general, and Irish womanhood in particular.

What gives her female characters their power is their use of language, and through language, their connection to the natural world and to a world of myth. Carr's heroines have the power to use words to express their anger, their grief, their unresolved mourning. Although they cannot transcend their difficult lives, and often opt for suicide as the only resolution available, they occupy the centre of the stage to tell their story, to give voice to their turmoil. Carr often uses the accent and dialect of the Midlands of Ireland as 'the Midland accent is more rebellious than the written word permits'[2] and the speech of Carr's

[2] Marina Carr, Introduction to *Portia Coughlan* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1998). p.?

women is, in the main, wild and rebellious, using slang, idioms, swear words and a plethora of local expressions and colourful language that is sometimes only tenously connected to English. All of this is spoken in the Midlands accent, which increases the difficulty for the listener, particularly if she or he is not from Ireland. Carr is not very experimental when it comes to form. Although there is often a very interesting interplay between the real and the mythic in the plays, this is surely not new. She takes her lead first from the Greeks, and secondly, from Shakespeare. And yet, her plays are doing something new: they represent the tragedy of the feminine condition in contemporary culture. What they give us are women expressing, through words, their rage, their longings, their unresolved grief. In *Woman and Scarecrow*, Carr represents the bird of death coming to open Woman's veins and drink her blood. In fact, Death opens her veins and dips a quill into her blood. Carr writes in red ink, with the blood of women. Her words sing the song of the forbidden body – the desiring body of the woman-mother in Western, Catholicism-ridden culture. In *Woman and Scarecrow* she reached a point of spareness of setting and action – a woman on her deathbed – to allow the woman's voice to occupy the entire stage.

In 1977, Cixous wrote an article for *Le Monde* entitled 'Aller à la mer' ['To Go To The Sea/The Mother'] in which she analysed the relationship of (Western) women to the practices of contemporary theatre. She begins this article by stating that 'Il faut toujours qu'une femme soit morte pour que la pièce commence'.[3] [It is always necessary for a woman to die so that the play can begin.] Citing the examples of Electra, Antigone, Ophelia and Cordelia, she concludes that theatre functions as specular fantasy, where women characters act as mirrors, reflecting heroic values for male spectators. Theatre, even more than fiction, is the 'privileged place of a double perversion, both voyeurist and

[3] Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', *Le Monde*, 28 April 1977, p.19. My translation.

exhibitionist', the place where women are framed as both specular objects and mirror-images of men – the privileged space of representation of what Irigaray referred to as *hom(m)osexualité*: 'the self-love of man through the intermediary of the feminine appropriated into his language'. [4] Cixous concludes by calling for a theatre that would lessen dependence on the visual and stress the auditory. Thus, she herself began to write plays when she began to see theatre as a privileged space for the voicing of the body/text:

> […] to learn to attune all our ears, especially those that know how to capture the movements of the unconscious, to hear the silences and beyond. No more 'alienation', quite the opposite: this stage-body will not hesitate to come close up, to get near the danger, but to be alive.[5]

The creation of a *scène-corps* (stage-body) would entail a return to the mother, as the homophonic title of the article suggests: a place where women can both listen and be heard, where they can speak and hear the incessant *movement* of the sea in its diffuseness, its multiplicity and its indeterminacy. This image suggests an amniotic globe which contains both actors and spectators, surrounding and permeating them with sound: 'All it would take would be for a woman to go beyond prohibition, to be multiple'.[6] Above all, this would be a form of theatre that would create the conditions for an auditory apprehension of movements in the in-between of body and text, conscious and unconscious meanings. Recalling Artaud's conception of the 'function' of theatre as 'something as localised and as precise as the circulation of the blood in the arteries, or the apparently chaotic development of dream images in the brain',[7] Cixous envisions a theatre that would stage a woman 'in her body, starting with her

[4] Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*, p.156. My translation.
[5] Cixous, 'Aller à la mer'., *Le Monde*, 28 April 1977, p.19. My translation.
[6] Ibid. Cixous, p.19.
[7] Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p.141. My translation.

blood […] where her story is decided', and where 'one gesture – capable of transforming the world – will suffice'.[8] The power of theatre for Cixous at this point was clearly its potential for undermining the scopic regime, for using the vocal and auditory dimensions of theatre to collapse the boundary between body and text in a way that cinema could never do. It seems to me that Carr has gone some way toward creating the stage-body envisaged by Cixous, a stage-body that gives voice, through an anarchic tongue, to the frustrations and the losses imposed on women's bodies within culture. Carr's women howl of their wildness, their violence, their close association with nature, and ultimately death – and of their banishment from another world, a world where they would be free to give full expression to their human experience, in the form of writing, perhaps.

Luce Irigaray, in her essay on women and madness, asks a troubling question:

> The imaginary and the symbolic of intra-uterine life and of the first bodiy encounter with the mother… Where are we to find them, in what darkness, what madness have they been abandoned? […] The social order, our culture, psychoanalysis, want it that way: the mother must remain forbidden, excluded. (Irigaray, 1991: 39)

One of the ways out of this impasse, suggests Irigaray, is to find the words that speak

> the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal. (43)

[8] Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', p.19.

This has always been the writing project of Marina Carr – to make plays about women's relegation to a position of madness within culture, and, in particular, to represent the dereliction of the maternal body within this (Irish) culture, as well as the consequential perversion of relations between mothers and children, between women and men. Irigaray notes that one of the outcomes of the relegation of the maternal body to a state of abjection is the loss of other forms of creativity for women:

> We engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example. But this creation has been forbidden us for centuries, and we must reappropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women. (Irigaray, 1991: 43)

Carr's theatre stages the struggle between the maternal as procreation of children, and the maternal as the creation of art, as the expression by the woman of herself as a subject, giving expression to her subjectivity in ways other than through the maternal function. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in *Woman and Scarecrow*. In fact, the division of the woman into two parts – Woman and Scarecrow – is to a large extent a dramatic representation of the cultural splitting of the feminine from the maternal, as discussed by Irigaray. At the end of the play, Scarecrow takes a feather from her wing, pierces a vein in Woman's wrist, and begins to write in her blood on a piece of parchment. And she asks a series of questions: 'Why did you stop seeking?', 'Why did you not flee when love had flown?' (Carr, 2006: 221). The answer to these questions is that Woman used her children to shield herself from having to make choices that would have freed her to live a creatively passionate life. She has lived, the audience concludes, disconnected or alienated from her passion, from her body. She has dedicated herself to her children: 'the mountainous bellies and the cut knees, the broken arms, the temperatures, the uniforms, the football, the music, the washing machine, the three square meals, yes I hid behind it all.'

(222) She has been a good mother. And yet, what she remembers in the end is what her body remembers: 'something about the alignment of sun and wind and song on this most ordinary of afternoons […] the bare facts, me, the sun, the shivering grass, Rusalka singing to the moon.' (223) What Woman expresses at the close of the play is the Western woman's longing to give expression to her own bodily experience of the natural, material world in an unmediated way – in a way that is not mediated through a culture in which she has no voice. Carr is one of the few women playwrights to have given voice, on the stage, to women's bodily experience. Even more than this, she has foregrounded, in her plays, the loss of women's agency, as a result of the excessive attribution of madness and the death-drive to the female body within culture. She does not idealise the feminine or the maternal, rather she shows the losses incurred by women (and ultimately by society as a whole) as a result of the radical nature of the repression of the relationship with the first body, and of primary desire. Woman's self-denial is in line with her heritage: her lineage is that of women who have practised similar self-denial. Her own mother's life is described in term of buried anger and frustration:

> Scarecrow: I remember she lived bitterly. I remember her battering the spuds into a venomous pulp for the dinner. […] I remember the weeping in darkened rooms […]. And underneath it all I remember this volcanic rage that erupted given any opportunity on the small, the weak, the helpless. […] A woman of rock, carved out of the rocks around her. (Carr, 2006: 203)

'Woman' remembering, as she dies, a moment when she listened to Rusalka's song to the moon on the radio while simultaneously being aware of the sun, the wind, the grass, is a woman wanting to give expression to her own humanity, to the fullness – and the smallness – of her life on earth. This is the creative

impulse, and in Woman, as in the history of womankind, Carr seems to imply, it has been stifled.

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