Women on the stage in the 1990s: foregrounding the body and performance in plays by Gina Moxley, Emma Donoghue and Marina Carr

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In the 1990s an unprecedented fermentation began within Irish society, calling traditional attitudes into question and revealing secret skeletons in secret closets. Instances of sexual hypocrisy, child abuse and domestic violence were made public and provoked debates which highlighted the need to reconsider perceptions as well as legal formulation of the links between the individual, the community and its institutions. Introducing their 1997 volume *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis argue that this 'fairly sudden social change in Ireland . . . is directly concerned with gender', and there is 'a growing intellectual awareness of the extent to which social experience, past and present, is gendered'.¹ A sign of the revisioning of Ireland's gender politics was that, in 1993, the ban on homosexuality was ended, and divorce became accessible after the 1995 referendum. As a result of a number of high-profile scandals, the Catholic Church rapidly lost its long-held grip on the conscience and moral life of the people.

Concurrently, in the world of the theatre the process of diversification that had begun earlier was gaining momentum, clearing as well as securing a space for the appearance and practice of an array of non-traditional approaches and experimental forms. Companies representing regional, local, and even quite specific interests related to class, gender or alternative sexuality provided a stage for playwrights becoming conscious that 'Ireland is not one story anymore, and we cannot expect single theatrical metaphors for it. Instead of one story and many theatrical images of it, we are moving towards a dramatisation of the fragments rather than the whole thing, the whole society.'² It was in

this context that the 1990s witnessed a substantial enrichment and increasing critical success of playwriting activity by Irish women. Work by writers like Marina Carr suddenly reached both national and international stages, and several other female dramatists had their plays produced, a development in which the role of respective experimental groups and non-mainstream companies cannot be overlooked.

In addressing the female experience, several Irish woman playwrights chose to portray this broad thematic as intimately bound up with the socially constructed relations between men and women, and between women and institutions against the backdrop of history and dominant ideologies. Undoubtedly, a lot of measures have been implemented recently to alter the traditionally subordinate position of women in the patriarchal society of Ireland to ensure their gender equality, a positive result of EU membership in this respect. Entrenched as it is in far-reaching traditions, however, the socio-cultural construction of woman shows less flexibility. As Pat O'Connor points out, in spite of all visible improvements

women continue to be seen, effectively, as 'outlaws' – people who are 'different', 'suspect', 'not like us', people whose loyalty to 'the system' is problematic. . . . Women in Ireland, regardless of their age, life stage, ascribed class position and participation in paid employment, are surrounded by structural and cultural cues which define their lives. These cues refer not only to their position in the economic, political, religious and domestic arenas, but also presuppose their positive experience of responsibility for child care, and the 'naturalness' of subsuming their identities in families and/or in other caring relationships. They assume their relative disinterest in the 'normal' male trappings of individuality, viz. economic independence, individual autonomy, money and power.³

The situation, thus, is rather contradictory. While woman is declared an equal citizen with man on the level of rhetoric and in the eyes of the law, an inquiry into the day-to-day reality of individual lives may provide evidence that the second sex is still the 'other' in certain conditions. Similar doubts are expressed by Tom Inglis concerning the liberalisation of sexuality:

During the last half of the twentieth century Ireland became unsettled culturally, particularly in relation to sexuality, pleasure, and desire. . . . Sexually transgressive women may have been celebrated in film and literature, but in real life public transgressors were shamed and castigated.⁴

Drama has always been a genre primarily concerned with contradictory forces and unresolved problems. In the context of social transformations that involve significant improvements yet tend to bring ambiguities to

the surface at the same time, Irish female playwrights are challenged by the most delicate, even troubling aspects of issues related to gender, sexual behaviour, marriage and family.

The essential role of the body in theatre across centuries of play-acting is, of course, indisputable. Paradoxically, however, until recent times the female body had been largely absent from the traditional stage as an agent performing subjective realities. As Stanton B. Garner contends, political and ideological conventions governed the representations of women, and the female appeared in the theatre refigured 'as image or fiction' at the expense of her disembodiment and dephysicalisation 'in terms of lived bodiliness'. It is contemporary women's drama, the critic continues, which has managed to liberate the female body from 'corporeal subjection' by introducing 'explorations of the politics of embodiment, addressing the theatrical body in gender specific terms'.⁵ Due to these efforts women are no longer represented in the image men created of them or as the conveyors of male-centred ideological positions and ideas, but embody and stand for their distinct experiences and ambitions. Informed by her study of French feminist theory, feminism and theatre, Elaine Aston discusses the strategy of 'Speaking the body / the body speaking' on stage as an equivalent of Luce Irigaray's term 'feminine discourse', which was devised in reference to woman-authored literature. Also, as 'a touchstone in feminist theoretical writings on women's theatre' Aston cites approvingly Julia Kristeva's distinction between the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic', the latter understood as the pre-Oedipal or presocial/maternal versus the Oedipal or social phase/ realm, with the corollary that the speaking subject belongs to both.⁶

Foregrounding female corporeality in drama provides a medium through which creative ambiguity can be achieved, made possible by the duality that the body is a sign of both social positionality and cultural experience associated with the symbolic. At the same time it also reflects individual desire that remains undefined by communal discourses and retains ties with the semiotic. Subjectivity is evoked in this kind of theatre as a process rather than a fixed entity, a site of rivalling forces that ultimately defy strict categorisations of the self.

Critical accounts of the Irish theatre have highlighted the privileging, until very recently, of the verbal and literary over the physical and performative. Arguably, this may have been connected to the focus on colonial/postcolonial identity in a considerable bulk of earlier drama, a perspective the authors tended to revisit and often treat as a complex given rather than a field of contestation. In contemporary Irish culture – inviting the post-postcolonial description under the ramifying effects of globalisation, Celtic Tiger economy and the reverse migration the

country has been facing – the concept of identity is becoming, necessarily, more flexible, allowing for fluid, protean formations. The tendency fits in with comparable worldwide developments which reinforce the notion that identity should be understood in terms of performative behaviour that enacts changes, and not by interpreting it as a bundle of static characteristics. Lib Taylor, writing on the recent scholarly investigation of the subject, states: ‘Postmodernism, feminism and psychoanalysis have theorised identity as performative, perceiving identities as constructed through a process of reiteration (repetition/rehearsal) and citation (reference/quotation).’ Having been imported into social discourse from the vocabulary of the theatre, the term performance/performative is nowadays reapplied by theatre and drama studies and ‘implies a self-aware theatricality’, the ‘conscious use of the practices and conventions of theatre’ and the ‘deliberate manipulation of citation and reiteration’ as a potential strength of the genre.⁷

In contemporary Irish drama, the renaissance of the monologue signals a self-conscious move towards heightening the performative element in the exploration of the self, according to revised perspectives on identity. The monologue seems to be a dramatic subgenre practised by male authors primarily, involving acts of performance which take place through the medium of language, sound, and the unfolding of multiple narrative spaces, and less so through acts of corporeality. Characteristic examples include respective plays by Brian Friel, Conor McPherson, Donal O’Kelly and Enda Walsh. It is mainly in the work of new Irish woman playwrights that the performing body as a complex source of signification gains more prominence than it has since Yeats, and renders hidden realities visible as well as reifies alternative modes of self-construction. Their praxis exploits the representational potential we can understand through Judith Butler’s terms, who claims that ‘As an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention’.⁸ For the purposes of the present chapter the emphasis is on ‘possibilities’.

Central to the following discussion is the staging of women characters in three plays, *Danti Dan* by Gina Moxley (1995), Emma Donoghue’s *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1995) and *By the Bog of Cats . . .* by Marina Carr (1998). On the one hand, these works are found representative of the bulk of female-authored writing in the mid- to late 1990s for the ways they deploy, reshape and forge resources and strategies to probe into the corporeal dimension of experience. What these texts conspicuously foreground is the socially inscribed body with its potential for change, while they also enhance awareness of the element of performance

in the portrayal of their woman characters' 'resistance to definition'⁹ and search for self-possession on their own terms. The three plays, on the other hand, are different enough in focus to offer an opportunity to explore through them the richness and novelty of the female contribution to the representation and critical revisioning of the subject of gender. The Moxley and Donoghue plays were first performed at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin by Rough Magic and Glasshouse Productions respectively, while Carr's had its première at the Abbey during the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1998.

About the thirteen-year-old female protagonist of *Danti Dan*, called Cactus – a nickname suggestive of both difference and rejection – Gina Moxley writes in her afterword to the play:

Girls of that age are very often presented as passive victims of men's behaviour towards them and I wanted to see what happened if the reverse was the case. I'd never bought into all of that sugar and spice stuff and was interested in having a female character with an unnervingly steady gaze and who appears remorseless.¹⁰

By turning the tables this way, the author subverts the gender stereotypes in conventionally scripted victimiser–victim scenarios, and represents a girl/boy story from an unorthodox angle to result in a play which is ruthlessly unsentimental and disturbing. In his review of the first production, Fintan O'Toole claims that the principal merit of *Danti Dan* lies in 'the remarkable skill and unflinching determination with which Moxley pursues an uncompromising vision of the relationship between sex and power. Beneath the dull surface there is a turbulent interplay of countercurrents and reversals.'¹¹ My analysis relies on the proposition that Cactus's 'unnervingly' cruel and uncompromising acts of victimisation should be treated not as a manifestation of innate wickedness, but as an instance of the potential danger inherent in the prevailing gender economy of a working-class environment at the time the action is set, the summer of 1970, in rural Ireland.

Given its all-teenager cast, made up of three girls and two boys between thirteen and eighteen, the play is inevitably preoccupied with the body from the start. At the dramatic stage of transition between childhood and adulthood, the characters' hyper-consciousness of corporeal signs and changes is combined with their interest in sex in general and the expression of their emerging sexual needs in particular. The girls are obsessed with fashion, discuss the size of their growing bosoms, compare the dates when their period is due, and, in secret, initiate role-playing to act out adult sexual encounters as depicted in a syrupy novel they get hold of. At the same time the play stresses that they are

regulated bodies in their society, whose values are transmitted to and imposed on them within the structure of the patriarchal family. The off-stage parents are reported to be keeping a strict, unfailing control over sixteen-year-old Ber and fourteen-year-old Dolores's movements. Their father deals the girls an occasional 'clatter' (p. 9) so that they should keep to the uncontested rules of domestic life and observe the requirement not to stay out late.

Moxley's play succeeds in revealing the paradox which lies at the core of the dominant discourse on sexual behaviour and its restrictive implications for the developing female body. While the guarding of virginity before marriage is of paramount importance, the teenage girls are left largely ignorant of or are even misled about elementary questions of women's intimate healthcare. Tampons should not be used during menstruation as the offstage mother insists, her sanction quoted by Dolores with more than a little embarrassment: "Cause you are not a virgin anymore after them or something like that" (p. 23). Asked by Cactus about the actual details of lovemaking and the sensations it involves, Ber, who has started to have sex with eighteen-year-old Noel, gives tentative or evasive replies, testifying to a lack of self-confidence and a personal voice to speak about sex. O'Connor claims that adolescent girls tend to value themselves less highly than boys and the fate of their relationships is often subject to 'the culturally created difficulty of treading a line between being too sexually available and not sufficiently sexually available' which are 'important elements in patriarchal control'.¹² Ber's confusion and apparent lack of interest in sexuality as a source of personal fulfilment renders her passive and negligent, since she does not bother about the possible consequences of the unsafe sex she practises. A crucial issue in the play, Ber's teenage pregnancy is represented in the context of severe regulations on the body unhappily combined with adults' failure to give the young a basic introduction into its reproductive functions. Ber thinks of herself as 'far too young' for pregnancy, and tries to lull her suspicions by the thought that 'Anyway, it [the intercourse] was only standing' (p. 23). Yet in spite of this immature view of how her own body works, she is conscious of pregnancy as a disaster for a young unmarried girl even in modern Ireland, unless a quick marriage remedies her moral status. The drama demonstrates the weight of the relevant social conditioning and the cautionary impact of reports circulating about the tragic incidents of child-murder linked with pregnancies and deliveries kept secret. When she steps on a bundle lying at her feet, Ber takes fright that the covered object may be the lifeless body of an abandoned infant.

Unmarried youngsters in a conservative Irish community are hardly granted space to enjoy sex privately and undisturbed in their parents' home and so Ber and Noel's lovemaking takes place in the fields. Yet adult restrictions on allowing the discourse of sex to be more helpful for teenagers prove inefficient and backfire in an important respect. The intimacies of Ber and Noel are on show for the vigilant eyes of the younger characters, who roam outdoors during the summer holidays, initiating them into the otherwise forbidden territory. The couple's first duet on stage constitutes a scene witnessed by Cactus from her hiding place like a spectator in the depth of the pit of the theatre, rendering her passive but voyeuristic, susceptible to and influenced by what she peeps at and overhears. Ber and Noel act out their respective positions in the relationship, which can be viewed from Butler's perspective that gender is performed and the 'mundane reproduction ground of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence'.¹³ The series of speech- and bodily acts Ber and Noel produce present their gender identity rather conventionally, as constructed in terms of the divisive binary system. The girl proposes that they start saving, that they buy soon the nicest rings as well as decide which hotel would be the most suitable venue for the wedding reception. In contrast, the boy demands more bodily contact and strives to control the situation from the position of male authority. 'Come on down to the cornfield', he asks Ber impatiently, barely attentive to the issues preoccupying the girl, then gives the order: 'put your hand in me pocket there a minute. . . . The front one, you fucking eejit' (pp. 12–13).

Even though it defies religious teachings and parents' hints and warnings, the rebellion of teenagers in response to adult strictures regulating their sexuality, which seems to culminate in Ber's engaging in premarital sex with Noel, does not revise the conventional model of gender roles. That gender relations are basically unequal and, moreover, manifest relations of power is reconfirmed for Cactus in a later scene. In this Noel is enraged over the news that Ber wears a mock engagement ring in secret and has got pregnant, which threatens him with the prospect of having to marry her out of duty far too soon for his inclinations. He pushes the girl with such vehemence that 'she falls down the steps of the monument' (p. 50). Fearing she might lose him if she protests, Ber reacts with self-humiliation. By the acts she has witnessed and the insinuations she has been exposed to, Cactus, however, is prompted to imitate Noel's behaviour in her own sexual experimentations. She forces the mentally retarded, fourteen-year-old Dan to have

sex with her, exercising power over him in a way she saw to be a salient part of Noel and Ber's encounters.

For Cactus, Dan is a partner weaker than she, whom she can abuse at will. The scenes in which their encounters are staged replay in grotesque, exaggerated, violent fashion those where Noel and Ber enact their unequal gender roles. Cactus orders her vulnerable partner to engage in kissing and in touching each other's private parts with her, imitating the manoeuvres adopted by Noel earlier. Here, however, the bodily subjection of the partner is far more pronounced:

CACTUS: [...] What are you afraid of? ... Come on, I haven't got all summer you know. Do it Danti-dan.

He kisses her, his arms stiffly by his sides. She thumps him to make him more active. He clumsily fumbles inside her shirt. She gropes in his pockets and down his trousers.

[...]

DAN: When's the man going to give me the money? (pp. 53–4)

The relationship of Noel and Ber reinforces elements of conventional heterosexual exchange, promising to give both the parties what they wish for, which is characteristically gendered as well. On his part, the boy takes it for granted that when married, he will be entitled to 'flah you cross-eyed whenever I like' (p. 12), whereas the girl hopes she will have the chance 'to move out, to give up work' (p. 22). Similarly, Dan complies with Cactus's self-serving schemes in order to achieve his own goal. He is eager to get money through the mediation of the girl with which he could leave for the American West, a dream outdated like Ber's idea about marriage as a solution for a woman's life. By inverting the observed gender roles, Cactus acts out a kind of mimicry of masculine authority that she has seen governing Noel's behaviour toward Ber.

Mimicry is a strategy conceptualised by postcolonial, feminist and cultural studies as a means of interrogating the alterability of power relations and intervening in the hierarchical system of positions. Citing Irigaray, Marvin Carlson contends that mimicry has a disruptive power which 'lies less in its conflict of codes, ... than its excess and exaggeration', and reveals its capacity to become subversive of the patriarchal order.¹⁴ Cactus's manipulations are subversive, yet also destructive, entailing disruption which grows into disaster. The play's catastrophic final scene stages a frightened Dan divulging to Ber the clandestine sexual games he took part in with Cactus. This provokes a fierce fight, which ends with Cactus tossing her betrayer into the river. The vengeful

act not only replicates, but magnifies to horrific proportions, the earlier scene where the furious Noel pushes Ber for her 'lies' with such vehemence that she falls to the ground. Cactus's mimicry replays gender inequity with excess, leading to a fatal outcome which exemplifies the latent danger underlying the 'original'. Unwilling to conform to the gender rules which require her to remain passive and wait to be courted, Cactus refuses to perform the role of the subordinate 'other' in the conventional way. Her acts reverse elements of the given system and, bringing about disorder and destruction, expose the oppressive tendencies lurking in the practices of gender communication and sexuality in the society. Moxley's representation of how the weaker body can be manipulated denaturalises the working of normativity, envisioning its potentially distorting impact on young individuals' personal development and nascent sexual relations. Although the action of *Danti Dan* takes place decades ago, the shocking sight of child abuse ending in tragedy provokes audiences to ask the question whether equity in gender has advanced so much since 1970.

Emma Donoghue's *Ladies and Gentlemen* is one of those recent Irish plays which, in the words of Dawn Duncan, 'move from internal examination to external vision'.¹⁵ As such, it guides the audience further than Moxley's in both place and time, yet its links with the 1990s disputes about gender are fairly obvious. The play's principal character is Annie Hindle, a real person living in the late nineteenth century, renowned for her contribution to the American theatre, the vaudeville in particular. In the New Island edition the text is followed by excerpts from an 1891 article originally published in the New York paper *The Sun*, entitled 'Stranger than fiction',¹⁶ a phrase which alludes enigmatically to the exceptional course of Hindle's life. Born in England in 1847, she settled down at a young age in the United States where she enjoyed a brilliant career on the stage as male impersonator. The author of the article clearly relishes reporting the unorthodox turns in her story: first Annie got married to a male actor, then to a dresser working in the theatre, a woman whose background was Irish. A few months after the wedding she separated from her husband, bearing the marks of the unhappy marriage on her body in the form of bruises and a black eye. Subsequently she remained a faithful 'husband' to her other partner until the latter's untimely death from breast cancer.

Male impersonation, the act of performance Annie excelled in, is usually discussed alongside its male-driven counterpart, the drag. Laurence Senelick contends that 'Unlike the ancient and sanctioned practice of men portraying women on stage, female assumptions of male identity appeared in the theatre as a novelty, a salacious turn, a secular

Johnny-come-lately'. Such practices were prevalent from the 1860s, a period, as Senelick observes, 'when the female emancipation movement was growing more vociferous and demanding. On stage, unruly women disguised as men were less threatening . . .'.¹⁷ In a sense it was just the right time for Annie to enter the scene, as she could attract hundreds of women audience members who may well have cherished the secret wish to be free to dress and behave like men. Male spectators, in contrast, were probably content to see that the transgressive inclinations of woman, the 'other', were duly contained, and so controlled within the walls of a social institution, the theatre. Given the far-reaching traditions of the art, crossed-dressed males tended to achieve subtle meanings, but male impersonators had to work harder to counteract the easy discovery of their act and critics berating it as a 'sentimental, and therefore harmless reversal'.¹⁸ Annie, however, won the battle as a result of her exceptional talent and skills. She appeared not in the stereotypical roles of 'a sailor or a farmhand or a schoolboy' that lovers of the music-hall had been accustomed to, 'but as a flash young spark, clad in natty, well fitting street-wear'.¹⁹ In short, she impersonated a dandified male individual, a cultural icon of the Anglophone world in the period, whom many an average vaudeville fan would celebrate as a real, desirable man and not just as a good imitation.

Ladies and Gentlemen offers a unique variant of the female biography play in that it represents a life centred on role-playing on stage, thus doubling the basic situation of theatre performance and its 'potential for displaying self-conscious performativity' which 'can become the mechanism for [social] deconstruction'.²⁰ The very title underscores the play's metatheatrical character, which Donoghue further enhances by appointing the dressing-room as primary setting, a liminal, in-between space for actors to shed their everyday selves and prepare themselves for their next entrance on stage. Through the figure of Annie, the drama introduces the practice of female cross-dressing as a performative strategy to re-negotiate the ontological status of gender. In realising the subversive potential of the act, the protagonist reveals the gendered signification of 'men's clothes', her actual stage wear: 'They're only called that because men got a hold of them first. You bet your sweet life I like 'em; they've got pockets for everything' (p. 22). Dressed in these clothes Annie 'set[s] out to look more man than the men do' (p. 23), her version of male impersonation presenting the body as protean and herself as 'the model of modern man' according to the song, 'A Real Man' (p. 103). The self-styled strategy brings to mind Oscar Wilde, Annie's contemporary, for whom androgyny and the aesthetic provided an alternative to the limitations of identity operative in both Irish

nationalist and British imperialist discourse.²¹ Annie's activity of impersonation exposes as well as makes full use of the performative nature of gender. Butler argues:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. . . . the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.²²

By acting in men's clothes, imitating male corporeal movements with ease and plausibly addressing women in songs to regard her as an eligible male, Annie succeeds in demonstrating that gender transformation is really possible. Audience reaction can be gauged from a letter from one of her admirers, which reads: 'Darling Mr Hindle, please oh please oh please leave off this pretence that you are a woman only dressed as a man. . . . I told my mother I know you are a real true man and I intend for to marry you' (p. 38). Annie's performing female body associated with authentic masculinity is a contradiction that throws light on the ambiguous nature of gender as an embodied mediator of cultural inscription and social conditioning.

That gender is not necessarily a prescribed destiny but can be lived and experienced as a 'subversive performance'²³ is also suggested by the insight the play offers into Annie's second marriage. Reciprocal love grows between her and an Irish girl, her new dresser called Annie Ryan, whom she rechristens as Ryanny, for whom Annie looks 'more of a gentleman than any man I ever laid eyes on' (p. 58). Ryanny's insistence that they should get married and have a church wedding with the usual paraphernalia must be linked to her Catholic roots and conservative upbringing. Yet the act qualifies as highly subversive, violating both age-old law and custom while constituting an early example of same-sex marriage, a much questioned option and only recognised in a few places even over a century later. The portrayal of Annie and Ryanny's life together alienates gender even further by appropriating the lesbian theatrical practice: they perform a butch-femme couple who construct their family roles outside the ideological system, a choice which enables them 'to playfully put on and take off the gendered sign-systems of appearance'.²⁴ One of the significant props in the play, the dummy called Miss Dimity the couple receive as a present from the dressing-room, symbolises, with her bare body ready to carry whatever kind of cover is selected for it, that woman is a signifier open to a set of potentials.

To reclaim the private life of a public idol requires a dramaturgical feat which allows the audience to see the person without the mask, as conventional expectations would have it. Donoghue, for her part, follows the Wildean precept and gives Annie the mask to tell the innermost truth about herself. The play is working across two temporal modes; its main line of action, set in 1891, presents her in the act of dressing and undressing, strapping and unstrapping the bandages to flatten her breasts as well as putting on, taking off, then resuming men's clothes again in preparation for the stage. For Annie, called back to work at the vaudeville theatre after Ryanny's funeral, the sequence of actions incarnates the pangs of hesitation, fear and self-doubt she suffers, raising the question whether art is possible after the trial of extreme trauma. Interspersed are scenes from the protagonist's memoryscape, which run a cycle between confession of love to the experience of loss through the partner's death and, thus, provide the private story with an archetypal frame. Only the language of the body is able to communicate the complexity of emotions involved, as two complementary scenes highlight:

ANNIE: What if I had something to tell you but I didn't know how?

...

I can't. . . . Let me show you instead. (*Kisses the side of RYANNY's face, kisses all the way to her mouth*) (p. 55)

...

RYANNY: What if I had something to tell you but I didn't know how?

...

I can't. Let me show you instead. (*Turned away from the audience, she undoes her nightdress. ANNIE looks [at the malignant growth] and recoils*) (pp. 83–4)

Eventually, Annie cannot but decide to wear the costume and step on the 'board' to sing and play again because, despite the torments of self-questioning, she concludes 'This is all I've got' (p. 100) – to perform is necessary. Impersonation as a gender-bending theatrical act assumes an ontological status. It appears to be equal to life, carrying a scale of memories from happiness to grief as the protagonist's story depicts while offering the opportunity to expand and multiple the self on the stage of the world.

Though set in the present unlike the plays discussed above, Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* . . . has the aura of timelessness about it, being a tragedy which loosely follows a Greek model, *Medea* by Euripides. While the resonance with ancient drama is a feature it shares with *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996), the other parts of the writer's

Midlands trilogy, *By the Bog of Cats* . . . is unique in that it has a frame grounded in the mode of the performative. A recent article by Maria Doyle looks at the presentation of the respective female protagonists' dead body on stage in mid-action in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*, 'which is, after all, not in fact dead, can be reanimated, and doing so, . . . testifies to the vitality and the malleability of the theatrical experience'.²⁵ Extending this direction of investigation to *By the Bog of Cats* . . . , parallels as well as differences strike the eye. At the opening of *By the Bog of Cats* . . . , it is dawn and a surrealistic scene unfolds with the protagonist, Hester, entering on a bleak and barren landscape of ice and snow, trailing 'the corpse of a black swan after her'.²⁶ She meets a man introducing himself as the Ghost Fancier, who turns out to have come for her. Yet, mixed up about what part of the day it is, he relinquishes his aim and leaves with the promise to return at dusk. Kind and polite, almost courting the lonely Hester, the Ghost Fancier enacts the role of lethal messenger as well as incarnating impending death, comparably to the gentle Death-figure in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who 'kindly stopped for me'.²⁷ Prophecies also reinforce the idea in the initial scenes that Hester's life is doomed. Whereas displaying the heroines' dead body well into the action 'certainly forecloses escape as an option' in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*,²⁸ escape seems to be foreclosed for Hester from the start: she is destined to die before the end of the day, the span of the play following the classical structure. Death is envisaged by Hester in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it is to be embraced rather than feared, being an end which forms part of nature's eternal cycle. After the disappearance of the supernatural visitor, she says to the choric figure, Monica: 'Swear the age of ice have returned. Wouldn't ya almost wish if it had, do away with us all like the dinosaurs' (p. 15). Her soul mate, the black swan, died in a similar fashion, its body having to be ripped out of a frozen bog hole by Hester. On the other hand, a sense of disintegration is looming as an actual threat to her identity in her discourse. Her life 'doesn't hang together' (p. 16) now that she has lost her common-law husband, Carthage Kilbride, to another woman.

Analysing *By the Bog of Cats* . . . as a transposition of the Medea-myth in contemporary Ireland, Melissa Sihra claims that the 'relationship between space, gender and the body' is crucial to its overall design.²⁹ A heightened corporeality in both action and language, supported by a strategic use of costume and accessories mark out the boundaries of two worlds, antithetical yet also overlapping, which can be associated with the Kristevan duality of the semiotic and the symbolic. Its centre being 'this auld bog, always shiftin' and changin' and coddin' the eye'

(p. 15), the one constitutes a liminal realm of otherness with a mysterious conjunction between visible and invisible, the living and the dead, rational and irrational, where the past keeps on intruding. It is dominated by the feminine with the Catwoman as professed Keeper of the bog, whose appearance in clothes of mouse fur and stinking of turf fuses human and animal, whereas her physical blindness, coupled with an inner vision empowering her to see into the secrets of the beyond, is a mythical feature. Opposed to this world is that of the settled community, governed by laws and rules of propriety which structure the life of its members, compelling them to comply with and inhabit their allocated place in the system. The dominant figure here is a patriarch, Xavier Cassidy, who walks about with a gun that lends weight to his peremptory orders and emphasises readiness to break those he finds rebellious in either of the two worlds. Hester lives on the margin of the two domains in a house by the bog, which for her is also a place of the maternal replete with memories of her mother called Big Josie, a traveller who was elusive like the bog itself and had ‘somethin’ cold and dead about her except when she sang and then . . . ya’d fall in love with her’ (pp. 64–5). Losing Carthage involves a multiple trauma for Hester: she is forced to leave the bogside house and move to town, to anonymity, which would entail dislocation as ‘corporeal unhomeliness’,³⁰ dispossession of love, home and roots. In Act I Carthage, his bride Caroline and Cassidy, her father, parade in front of her in their wedding clothing, which underscores her exclusion from an event that secures socially approved ties among people. Moreover, their treatment reduces her to the stereotypes constructed in relation to travellers as others³¹ when she is offered money by all to hasten her departure to ‘another haltin’ site’ (p. 35). Hester’s very identity as a human being is questioned, which Carthage even puts into words: ‘Who are ya and what sort of stuff are you made of?’ (p. 34).

Plays based on foretold destiny tend to deploy repetitive patterns that permeate and cut across various levels of the dramatic composition, including visual and auditory signs to structure, and reinforce tragic inevitability. Like its counterparts within the trilogy, *By the Bog of Cats* . . . displays a web of recurrent motifs woven into its fabric to enhance the sense of entrapment as noted in Clare Wallace’s discussion concerning tragic destiny and abjection in Carr’s Midlands trilogy.³² The bridal garment and images of women dressed in white trail through *By the Bog of Cats* . . . , establishing co-references to illuminate Hester’s journey toward her fate with a special focus on the mother–daughter relationship in the context of women faring amid the constraints of a bifurcated world. Josie, Hester’s seven-year-old daughter, comes on stage ready for

her father's wedding in 'Communion dress, veil, buckled shoes, handbag, the works' (p. 41), evoking a picture of herself at seven for Hester: 'Ya know the last time I saw me mother I was wearin' me Communion dress too. . . . And I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I'll watch her return' (pp. 41–2). The white communion dress is associated with initiation 'into the central ritual of Roman Catholicism and patriarchal Christianity',³³ a system of symbols and rules, and the scene from Hester's early life calls to mind the primal experience of individuals which involves separation from the mother to make entry into the symbolic possible and facilitate the achievement of subjecthood. However, Hester's obsession with waiting for her mother, which repeats Big Josie's habit of 'pausin' (p. 22), signifies that she managed to integrate into the community of the settled people only temporarily. In Sihra's opinion Hester, a marginalised 'itinerant living on the bog . . . failed to become a fully subjectified individual as she has never gained a sufficient substitute for the loss of her mother'.³⁴ Carthage had bought her a bridal dress, but did not fulfill his promise to marry her, having used her as an exotic sexual object for a time just as Cassidy may well have used Big Josie, only to give her up when a marriage bringing him prestige and economic gain was in sight. Disadvantaged and also existentially frustrated, Hester duplicates her mother's split nature in her restless, explosive comportment and temper: 'there's two Hester Swanes, one that is decent' while 'the other Hester, well, she could slide a knife down your face, carve ya up and not bat an eyelid' (p. 30).

The world of law, order and rules may also show its vulnerable side when, in unguarded moments, it becomes permeable to subversive forces and unruly bodies that despite its coercive power and ruthless pragmatism it fails to repress completely. Carr deploys folkloric humour, comic carnality and the performative to mock the hypocritical miming of respectability and represent the impulse to transgress institutionalised fixities and the binaries of gender and class. A hilarious little scene in Act I finds Josie dressed up to impersonate her Granny, a woman of traveller background as well, ridiculing her obsession with buying expensive clothes and her extreme greediness as signs of the effort to assimilate by overdoing the expectations of the settled community. Josie's show prefigures the grotesquely comic orchestration of the wedding dinner set in the Cassidy house in Act II, which is conceived in the traditional mode of the carnival as semiotic performance to 'resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society'.³⁵ The Catwoman is 'lapping wine from a saucer' (p. 43) while the priest who is flirting with

her wears his trousers and shirt but as a loose mask over his pyjamas and substitutes the text of saying grace with fragments of his one-time romance, incarnating and voicing the duality of social gloss and private reality. But most importantly for the present investigation, there is a strange proliferation of women in white, including the bride, Carthage's mother Hester dressed in the wedding garment she got from Carthage, and Josie wearing her communion dress. They all masquerade as the bride, producing an excess which deconstructs the conventional lustre of the wedding celebration and exposes, alongside the other carnival effects, 'Church, State, family and marriage . . . as false icons' to borrow from Enrica Cerquoni's analysis of the play.³⁶ The real bride, Caroline, becomes disillusioned by having to realise that marriage is not a new start, nor does it automatically bring about a happy ending. Having already 'killed' one bride, Carthage Kilbride may as well 'kill' another. On the other hand, Hester's appearance in the wedding dress can also be read as part of the larger, tragically woven structure of recurrent motifs. Her response to exclusion by claiming that this is 'my weddin' day be rigths and not wan of yees can deny it' (p. 54) only provokes Carthage's final rejection, echoing the one-time scene of loss when, also in a white dress, she was left alone by her mother. With the difference that now the people of power are ready to ostracise, even eradicate, her as a hateful intruder for her rebellious entrée, to 'make out [she] never existed' (p. 56).

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva asserts that within abjection there looms 'one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. . . . a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself'.³⁷ The brutal deeds of Act III are committed by Hester in the state of 'beside herself' under threats of annihilation and self-loss that come not only from outside but also from inside. Meeting the ghost of Joseph, her brother, confronts her with her repressed former realisation that the cherished memory of Big Josie as a mother caring for her and worth waiting for has been an illusion, since she 'had a whole other life there – How could she have and I a part of her?' (p. 74). Hester now feels exiled from both worlds, that of the settled people as well as that of the maternal she has been clinging to. In an interview Carr has said that for Hester, a traveller and thus 'a complete outsider', '[l]osing her common-law husband, and the possibility of losing her child due to the power of society is what makes her so vulnerable'.³⁸ The threat of separating her from her child haunts the discourse of the Kilbrides and Cassidys throughout the drama, their

recurrent phrase being characteristically physical: Josie should be got 'off of her'. With the most terrible outcome, Hester revolts against this too. Josie is still wearing her communion dress when Hester kills her out of love to save her from the trauma of losing her mother like herself, left alone also in the white outfit at the same age, and the child is taken 'off Hester' (p. 80) by Carthage only when dead.

The old black swan 'died on the wing' (p. 20), and Hester's death takes place in a similarly 'elevated' way: the Ghost Fancier reappears engaging her in a dance of death, which raises her suicide to the level of the fulfilment of destiny by linking the personal with the universal. Unlike Carr's other female suicides, The Mai and Portia, who kill themselves by drowning, Hester dies in the manner of performing agency over her own body and not letting society eradicate it; her cut-out heart, 'like some dark feathered bird' (p. 81), falls in front of the eyes of the other characters, spectators of a terrifying denouement. It is the kind of death she has envisaged for herself from the start, a reclamation of identity through reunion with nature. Bernadette Bourke extends her analysis of the carnivalesque mode in the play to Hester's death dance, which is at once 'terrifying and jubilant', 'representing renewal in a return to the great nurturing womb of nature, giver of life, death and continuity'.³⁹ Subversively, Hester's terrible deeds including the destruction of property, infanticide and suicide lay bare that the system of power can hardly operate by stigmatising and excluding the gendered and marginal other without wounding and paralysing itself as well. Christopher Murray's contention that in her previous work 'Carr sees pathos as more important than polemics' and is not interested 'in dramatising "issues" on stage'⁴⁰ holds true for *By the Bog of Cats*. . . . Pathos, however, might have the force to literally shake and stir the audience to derive those issues from the play for themselves.

The three authors show their female protagonists in the process of seeking and finding the means to appropriate agency through corporeality and performative acts, mimicry, masquerade and impersonation in particular, allowing them to sever themselves from the repetitive cycle of constructed roles which are inscribed in language and body. Agency may work to destructive ends, as Cactus and Hester testify in their own ways, yet it can still, or even more so, critique the manipulations of power when confronting the audience with pain and tragic loss happening in systems that harbour inequality, exclusion and marginalisation in however refined and concealed forms. To assess the innovative aspect of the work of new Irish woman playwrights, feminist theatre studies expert Jill Dolan's argument is worth quoting: 'If we stop considering the stage as a mirror of reality', which most of the writers

undoubtedly do, 'we can use it as a laboratory'.⁴¹ Laboratory – the term sounds illuminating. A space of experimentation where dramatic works are shaped to negotiate, transcend or alter the socio-cultural inscriptions primarily through the body as a locus of lived experience, as well as transgress the boundaries of inherited patterns of attitude and comportment while engaging their female characters in performing versions of gendered subjectivity and individual identity.

Notes

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- 2 Fintan O'Toole, 'Irish Theatre: The State of the Art', in Eamonn Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), p. 54.
- 3 Pat O'Connor, *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Irish Society* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1998), pp. 4–5.
- 4 Tom English, 'Of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland', *Éire-Ireland* 40: 3/4 (fall/winter 2005), pp. 30–1.
- 5 Stanton B. Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press), 1994, pp. 186–7.
- 6 Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 51–2.
- 7 Lib Taylor, 'Shape-shifting and Role-splitting: Theatre, Body and Identity', in Naomi Segal, Lib Taylor and Roger Cook (eds), *Indeterminate Bodies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 164–5.
- 8 Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, second edition (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 902.
- 9 Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities: Performance and Performativity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 22.
- 10 Gina Moxley, *Danti Dan*, in Frank McGuinness (ed.), *The Dazzling Dark* (London: Faber, 1996). p. 73. All further parenthetical references are to this edition.
- 11 Julia Furay and Redmond O'Hanlon (eds), *Critical Moments: Fintan O'Toole on Modern Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press), 2003, p. 136.
- 12 O'Connor, p. 14.
- 13 Butler, p. 904.
- 14 Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 176.
- 15 Dawn Duncan, *Postcolonial Theory in Irish Drama from 1800–2000* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 235.

- 16 Emma Donoghue, *Ladies and Gentlemen* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1998), p. 104. All further parenthetical references are to this edition.
- 17 Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 326, 340.
- 18 Kate Davy, 'Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp' in Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (eds), *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 235.
- 19 Senelick, p. 329.
- 20 Taylor, p. 166.
- 21 See Éibhear Walshe, 'Wild(e) Ireland', in Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket and David Alderson (eds), *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 68.
- 22 Butler, p. 901.
- 23 Anna McMullan, 'Gender, Authorship and Performance in Selected Plays by Contemporary Irish Women Playwrights: Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Marie Jones, Marina Carr, Emma Donoghue', in Jordan (ed.), p. 44.
- 24 Aston, p. 103.
- 25 Maria Doyle, 'Dead Center: Tragedy and the Reanimated Body in Marina Carr's *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*', *Modern Drama* 49: 1 (spring 2006), p. 41.
- 26 Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats . . .* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999), p. 13. All further parenthetical references are to this edition.
- 27 Emily Dickinson, poem 712 *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p. 177.
- 28 Doyle, p. 41.
- 29 Melissa Sihra, 'Greek Myth, Irish Reality: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats . . .*' John Dillon and S. E. Wilmer (eds), *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today* (London: Methuen, 2005), p. 119.
- 30 Anna McMullan, 'Unhomely Bodies and Dislocated Identities in the Drama of Frank McGuinness and Marina Carr', in Segal, Taylor and Cook (eds), p. 189.
- 31 See Sihra, 'Greek Myth, Irish Reality', p. 128.
- 32 Clare Wallace, 'Tragic Destiny and Abjection in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats . . .*', *Irish University Review* 31: 2 (autumn/winter 2001), p. 438.
- 33 Lisa Fitzpatrick, 'Metanarratives: Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Marina Carr, and the Irish Dramatic Repertory', *Irish University Review* 35: 2 (autumn/winter 2005), p. 332.
- 34 Melissa Sihra, 'A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats . . .*', in Jordan (ed.), p. 257.
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- 36 Enrica Cerquoni, '"One Bog, Many Bogs": Theatrical Space, Visual Image, and Meaning in Some Productions of Marina Carr's *By the Bog*

- of *Cats . . .*’, in Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan (eds), *The Theatre of Marina Carr: ‘Before Rules was Made’* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), p. 186.
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- 39 Bernadette Bourke, ‘Carr’s “cut-throats and gargiyles”. Grotesque and Carnavalesque Elements in *By the Bog of Cats . . .*’, in Leeney and McMullan (eds), p. 139.
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- 41 Jill Dolan, ‘Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?’, *Women and Performance Journal* 2 (1985), p. 8.