

**DBS SCHOOL OF ARTS**

**OWEN RYAN**

**THE BARDIC IMPERATIVE IN THE DRAMA OF MARINA CARR AND  
CONOR MCPHERSON**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the formative impact of Ireland's bardic narrative tradition on modern Irish drama and to show how elements of this bardic discourse, particularly in relation to the satire and the elegy, have a continuing impact upon the dramaturgy of Conor McPherson and Marina Carr. In chapter one the Gaelic Literary Revival's efforts to rehabilitate a form of 'musical speech' is examined in a line from Yeats and Synge through to Carr and McPherson. A brief history of Irish bardism is presented alongside a demonstration on how the craft was adapted into the broader folk culture. Finally the role of the bardic reciter is exposed in the work of both playwrights. Chapter two examines the plays of Marina Carr for the use of a procedure T. S. Eliot referred to as the 'mythical method'. It is shown that Carr's juxtaposition of myth and modernity disrupts realist procedures and accords with the bard's elegiac disposition in terms of exposing the failure of modern materialist society to account for the spiritual life of the individual. In chapter three a parallel is drawn between bardic discourse and Bakhtin's theories on popular folk customs and the European carnival tradition. Elements of Bakhtinian carnival are exposed in Carr and McPherson and it is demonstrated that the rejection of the finality of death, the celebration of the body and the recourse to laughter as a communal bind in the context of the carnival is appropriate to both playwrights. Chapter four examines the parallel between bardism and post-colonial theories on hybridity and Fanonian cultural dialectics. Chapter five concludes by showing a correlation between the legacy of bardic elegy and the absence of a realist tradition in modern Irish drama.

—Look at yourself, he said, you dreadful bard!

Buck Mulligan.

## CHAPTER 1: THE ART OF THE RECITER – BARDIC NARRATIVE IN IRISH DRAMA

William Butler Yeats's long held desire to "hear verse spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his"<sup>1</sup> was realised through the institution of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. That it was to be a theatre for musical speech founded on the art of the bardic reciter is evident from a last-minute emendation to the program notes for the premiere of *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) in which Yeats forewarns the audience that "[the lyrics] are not sung, but spoken, or rather chanted, to music, as the old poems were probably chanted by bards and rhapsodists"<sup>2</sup>. This early imperative for Irish theatre continues to the present day when one considers the drama of Conor McPherson and Marina Carr and the emphasis placed on the role of the reciter as mediator between art and audience, cadence and imagination. When the monologist in McPherson's *St. Nicholas* (1997) tells us "But most important. Over everything else. I had a story"<sup>3</sup> or when Millie in Marina Carr's *The Mai* (1994) interrupts the narrative to tell us the myth of Owl Lake<sup>4</sup>, it is understood that we are entering into a similar bardic compact, in which the reciter draws attention to the performance of their tale. This has the effect of creating a temporary community in which story and mythology is shared among practitioner and audience and creates "a strong cultural reminder that Irish drama arguably had its origins as much in the communal art of *seanchaí*, the act of

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<sup>1</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>3</sup>Conor McPherson, "St Nicholas" in *Four Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999), 177

<sup>4</sup>Marina Carr, "The Mai" in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 147

oral storytelling, as in a more formal written script performed on a proscenium stage in an urban centre.”<sup>5</sup>

In the preliterate society of the Gaelic Order, the bard was journalist and poet, eulogist and satirist. As praise-poet to the Gaelic chief his panegyrics sanctioned a lord’s rule; equally his scorn was feared and thought to possess powers of disfigurement that would blight the faces of his enemy. In short he wrote the consciousness of his race, a function commented upon by Yeats:

The bards, kept by the rules of their order apart from war and the common affairs of men, rode hither and thither gathering up the dim feelings of the time, and making them conscious.... The power of the bards was responsible, it may be, for one curious thing in ancient Celtic history: its self-consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

In the poetic environment in which the bards operated, speech approached the condition of music<sup>7</sup>; it is thought that the onset of modernity had sundered this association, breaking the reciter’s grasp of the inherent musicality of language. Among the early Gaelic Revival writers there was a general consensus to return to the study of traditional narratives and in particular, the bardic forms. Declan Kiberd called the return to bardic procedures “a characteristic element in the work of most post-Classical Irish poets”<sup>8</sup>. Addressing the Abbey actors in 1906, Patrick Pearse “recommended that all actors in Irish should ‘study the art of the traditional Irish

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<sup>5</sup>Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 115

<sup>6</sup>Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, “Yeats and the Bardic Tradition”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1994): 89-101 Accessed: 17/05/2010 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25512989>

<sup>7</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>8</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 71.

reciter”<sup>9</sup>. Yeats conceived of the Abbey theatre as being a home to this craft of musical speech as Schuchard relates:

When the Abbey Theatre finally became a reality in 1904, it was from the outset envisioned as a theatre of musical speech and chanted verse, a theatre in which actors on the stage would also serve as reciters in the streets, taking imaginative life to the populace through the applied arts of literature.<sup>10</sup>

John Millington Synge’s dramaturgy in its entirety can be read as a rehabilitation of the properties of musical speech. His peasant lyricism stresses vowel sounds and artful alliterations and internal rhymes. Christy Mahon in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* advocates the power of his newly discovered craft: “I’m after hearing my voice this day saying words would raise the topknot on a poet in a merchant’s town.”<sup>11</sup> The character of Catwoman in Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* eulogises the lyrical talents of the long departed Big Josie as “the greatest song stitcher ever to have passed through this place.”<sup>12</sup> Carr in a lecture given to the *Irish University Review* described the loss of the musicality of the “royal writers” of Shakespeare and Homer “[whose] ink [was] supplied from the blue veins of God, from the lyre strings of Orpheus”. In the same lecture Carr intimates a return of contemporary dramatists to such musical recitation: “The rest of us are ... struggling very hard to hear those sounds.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>10</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxii.

<sup>11</sup>John Millington Synge, “The Playboy of the Western World” in *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 143.

<sup>12</sup>Marina Carr, “By the Bog of Cats” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 275.

<sup>13</sup>Marina Carr, “Dealing with the Dead”, *Irish University Review* no. 1 (1998): 190-196 Accessed 20/04/2010 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25484769>

Osborn Bergin writing in *Irish Bardic Poetry* (1970) gives an account of bardic narratives which approximate magic spells in their influence over their audience:

At an earlier period he had been regarded as a dealer in magic, a weaver of spells and incantations, who could blast his enemies by the venom of his verse, and there are traces down to the most recent times of a lingering belief, which was not, of course, confined to Ireland, in the efficacy of a well-turned malediction.<sup>14</sup>

The “well-turned malediction” that Bergin describes, is that of satire – a particular genre of the bardic craft. The satire is recorded as the primary weapon in the bardic Idiom “on a par with excommunication”<sup>15</sup>, since as clan historian, the bard’s account of his lord or enemy if satirical, negatively affected the “imperishable fame”<sup>16</sup> of his target for all of history, affecting also his lineage and damaging his “*lóg n-enech* ‘honour-price’”<sup>17</sup>. The satire also carried with it the superstitious belief of causing facial disfigurement, as James Carney describes: “the result of the satire is an injury to the king’s honour (which may show physically as blisters on his face).”<sup>18</sup> J. M. Synge had consciously reworked this bardic idiom when he composed his poem ‘A Curse’, which contains the potent couplet: “Blight her brow with blotch and blister / Cramp her larynx, lung, and liver.”<sup>19</sup> The victim of Synge’s satire is addressed in the opening line as “a sister of an enemy of the author’s who Disapproved of ‘The Playboy.’” We see Synge’s use of this trope again, in Christy’s cursing of his father in *The Playboy of the Western World*: “May I meet him with one tooth and it aching, and one eye to

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<sup>14</sup>Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*. (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970), 4.

<sup>15</sup>John Minahane, *The Christian Druids, on the Filid or Philosopher-Poets of Ireland* (Dublin: Howth Free Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup>Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 1

<sup>18</sup>James Carney, *The Irish Bardic Poet. A Study in the Relationship of Poet and Patron*. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), 11.

<sup>19</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 72.

be seeing seven and seventy divils in the twists of the road”<sup>20</sup>. Similar bardic curses are deployed by successive protagonists in the works of Marina Carr. Hester Swane’s threat to Caroline in *By the Bog of Cats* is a precise working out of the invocation of facial disfigurement: “Listen to me now, Caroline, there’s two Hester Swanes, one that is decent and very fond of ya... And the other Hester, well, she could slide a knife down your face, carve ya up and not bat an eyelid.”<sup>21</sup> In Conor McPherson’s *The Seafarer*, protagonist Sharkey Harkin wears a bandage on his nose throughout – the victim of a recent verbal and physical attack on his character.

Roisin McLaughlin in *Early Irish Satire*, consulting the legal tracts on satire in Gaelic law, refers to the many different genres of satire in bardic poetry, offering examples in each. The use of nickname as a common reproach is typical. McLaughlin describes how “a nickname often alludes to physical defects”<sup>22</sup>, which again plays on clan fear of disfiguration. The recitation of “*tuba n-ainme* ‘taunting with a blemish’”<sup>23</sup> had far reaching consequences in bardic society as it interdicted the legal heptad on satire: “drawing attention to a person’s actual or supposed physical or social shortcomings was... an offence.”<sup>24</sup> Synge had used this interdiction to an ironic end in ‘A Curse’, however, in contemporary Irish drama it has perhaps lost its conscious link to bardism, but none-the-less the use of nicknames and ‘taunting with blemish’ would not be dissimilar to bardic invective. Richard uses nicknames at various times, to the detriment of Sharky’s character in McPherson’s *The Seafarer* (2006), calling him at

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<sup>20</sup>John Millington Synge, “The Playboy of the Western World” in *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>21</sup>Marina Carr, “By the Bog of Cats” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 285.

<sup>22</sup>Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

one point a “Johnny Weismuller”<sup>25</sup> (likening his sobriety to the clean-living actor of the original Tarzan films), then later referring to him as “Matt Talbot”<sup>26</sup> and finally “bah humbug”<sup>27</sup> in reference to his unseasonable demeanour. Equally “Animal imagery is a particularly striking feature of the satire ... It will be seen, however, that common farmyard and wild animals and birds are employed here, in contrast to the more exotic creatures which feature in panegyric poetry.”<sup>28</sup> In Marina Carr’s lyrical exchanges, the use of animal epitaphs is very close to bardic satire as seen in *Ariel* (2002). The characters invariably find unconscious recourse to bestial images in their descriptions of their lives and relationships: “the herd’s eternihy will do fine for me”<sup>29</sup>; “perchin on your conversation”<sup>30</sup>; “a pride a poets”<sup>31</sup>; “this next a hooves”<sup>32</sup>; “fat clucking owl”<sup>33</sup> which places this type of speech-act in the satire’s ruminant imperative. McLaughlin includes a gloss of such animal imagery: “gúaille cranda cailig ‘stiff shoulders of a cockerel’ ... ‘your grouse-like snout’ ... ‘you pug-nose of a dog’ ... ‘you dirty one, fox-like, filthy and naked’ ... ‘a raven’s face’ ... ‘the voice of an old hound on a chain.’”<sup>34</sup>

Bardism in its historical context was always a self-theatrical enterprise as evidenced through the writings of the bards themselves, in which they often use the properties of the elegy to forward their own political aspirations. An extant copy of a missive ‘Mór an t-Ainm Ollamh Flatha’ to a Gaelic Chieftain, Hugh Maguire circa 1600 gives an indication of the power enjoyed by the ‘lord’s poet’:

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<sup>25</sup>Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 12

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>28</sup>Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>29</sup>Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>34</sup>McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 33.

He (the lord's poet) is entitled to  
 some excessive demands; to a lord's counsel;  
 to prime lands; to be selected to attend a  
 peace parley; to go surety for an alien territory.<sup>35</sup>

Here the bard is promoting himself in a consular capacity. Caball describes how the bard sanctioned his patron's rule of law by "Invoking a series of motifs and conventions sanctioned by long usage, bardic poets established the validity of a ruling or potential lord before fellow noblemen and the inhabitants of his territories."<sup>36</sup> The juridical function of the bard was thus established by his poetry "which projects the key ideological precepts which underpinned conventional notions of lordship and its exercise."<sup>37</sup> The status of Bardic poetry in the Gaelic Order was not confined just to the genre of elegy and satire, it will be seen that in Gaeldom bardic narrative had a juridical function. This political-centrality was perceived keenly by the new colonial authorities who sought through a series of edicts and pamphlets to attack the narrative procedures of the bards and bardism. As noted by Georges Denis Zimmermann in *The Irish Storyteller* (2001), from the sixteenth century, the bard is increasingly seen as a seditious entity in Irish society: "In this context, the kind of storytelling that caught the limelight was the one suspected of fomenting rebellions and outlawry. Denunciations of the activities of 'bards' were revived."<sup>38</sup> The aspect of bardic narrative of most concern to the English rulers was the elegy, since it gave "praise [to] those who were found unmanageable by the English power."<sup>39</sup> Zimmermann also refers to Edmund Spenser's contemporary pamphlet entitled *A View of the Present*

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<sup>35</sup>Marc Caball, *Poets and Politics. Continuity and Reaction in Irish Poetry 1558-1625* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>36</sup>Caball, *Poets and Politics. Continuity and Reaction in Irish Poetry 1558-1625*, 2.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

*State of Ireland* in which Spencer advocated the eradication of any and all indigenous culture, particularly that pertaining to the bardic heritage:

[Spenser] recommended that Irish poets and entertainers be severely controlled, tamed or perhaps exterminated, so that one could reduce ‘that salvage nacion to better gouernment and cyvilitye. Let them learn some honest trade’, and stay put.<sup>40</sup>

Another important document on the perceived link between bardism and outlawry dates from 1561, Zimmermann includes the letter in its entirety, under the title ‘Irish Bardism in 1561’ “the author is presumably Thomas Smyth, a Dublin apothecary who became sheriff in 1576 and mayor in 1591.”<sup>41</sup> An extract shows the thinking behind its author and ruling class:

...The thirde sorte is called the Aesodan [*aos dána*: poets], which is to saye in English, the bards, or the rime septe; and these people be very hurtfull to the commonwealle for they chifflie manyntayne the rebels; and, further, they do cause them that would be true, to be rebelious theves, extorcioners, murtherers, ravners, yea and worse if it were possible.<sup>42</sup>

With the bardic order effectively outlawed, English rule had prevailed in the sense that the political dimension of bardism was destroyed. Yeats and the romantic schools with which he associated also pinpointed this time as the era which “[had] fractured [the] harmony between poetry and musical speech.”<sup>43</sup> And yet bardic narrative does not end there. In answering the question in *The Hidden Ireland* (1925) of “[what happened when] the bardic schools shut their doors about the middle of the

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<sup>40</sup>Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

seventeenth century”<sup>44</sup> Daniel Corkery discusses how the bardic craft adapted itself, through itinerancy, into the broader folk-culture, necessitating a democratization of the craft. Kiberd draws an interesting parallel between dissolution of patronage and the perpetuation of bardism: “many poets began to proclaim the death of their tradition: but they did so in lines of such vibrancy and power as to throw the thesis into question”<sup>45</sup>. Defying Spencer and the colonial edict to eradicate bardism, the craft through the popular anthologising of its own dissolution, created a new genre of elegy as bards everywhere embarked with vigour on documenting their loss and bemoaning their literary disinheritance through verse-elegies. Caball describes how this new elegiac imperative was crucial to the creation of modern Irish identity:

While bardic poets chronicled the progressive enfeeblement of Gaelic society with acuity, they also initiated a major reassessment of communal identity by way of reaction to crown expansionism. Although early modern bardic poets can be said to have been the last custodians of high Gaelic culture, they also, somewhat ironically, played a central role in the creation of a modern Irish sense of nationality.<sup>46</sup>

Corkery, Delargy and others<sup>47</sup> have documented the various transformations in bardism over the centuries since the fall of the Gaelic Order. The bards finding themselves for the first time seeking employment on the ‘open market’ bring their art into contact with the popular folk culture as a means of subsisting without patronage. Daniel Corkery describes the founding of a new institution called the ‘Courts of Poetry’: “the poets contrived to have meetings among themselves ... For these meetings they used the word cúirt (court), and the idea of judge and judgement is

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<sup>44</sup>Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland – A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1925), 96.

<sup>45</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70.

<sup>46</sup>Marc Caball, *Poets and Politics. Continuity and Reaction in Irish Poetry 1558-1625* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>47</sup>See Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland* and James H. Delargy *The Gaelic story-teller* cited above.

always present whenever we find them referring in their poems to such gatherings”<sup>48</sup>.

Through the ‘Courts of Poetry’ tradition, bardic metres were discarded in favour of popular song-metres in a further democratization of the craft:

The famous classical metres, needing more training than was now to be had, gradually fell into disuse, though broken poems were to be occasionally written in them down to the close of the century. For metres to take their place the poets now went to the songs of the people; from being despised of the poets, those amhrán, or song, metres were now to become their glory.<sup>49</sup>

Bardic narrative survives through its willingness to adapt itself into popular forms.

Corkery charts the rise of the *Aisling* poems (eighteenth century) written in popular metres “of the untrained poets, of the wandering ballad singers.”<sup>50</sup> The typical *Aisling* was an elegy composed as an invocation to the spirit of Ireland –literalized as a female spirit figure – to rescue the nation and restore its fortunes. This is precisely the trope worked out in Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*. The female redeemer, Cathleen, is at first harrowed by her peasantry into selling her soul to the devil in order to save them from starvation. Her altruistic act, however, saves her from perdition and the play closes with an image of Cathleen as the “*Spéir-bhean* (literally, sky-woman)”<sup>51</sup>, ascending to heaven. Yeats later revised the play in order to introduce new bardic features, emphasising musicality and incantatory speech:

In the play’s transitional state, Yeats changed the name of Kevin to Aleel; he expanded the role of the bard, giving him a “small square harp” and surrounding him with “fantastically dressed musicians,” his first version of troubadours who would form the musical chorus of later plays, And he added the chanted lyric “Impetuous Heart” all in anticipation of launching a theatre

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<sup>48</sup>Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland – A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1925), 96.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>50</sup>Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland – A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1925), 128.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

for poetic drama and musical speech. The bardic additions not only enhanced the performative mode of the play; they become an integral part of its theme.<sup>52</sup>

Yeats's advocacy of bardic recital in performance was a foundational ideology of the Abbey Theatre specifically, and in general became a trend in Irish theatrical writing continuing to this day. The reciter as mediator between an ancient tradition and a modern theatre audience is felt in contemporary Irish playwrights' insistence on the monologue tradition. Conor McPherson continues to "celebrate the power and value of stories as a crucial form of human intercourse."<sup>53</sup> Most pertinently in McPherson's early monologue plays, the role of the reciter enters an exclusive, reciprocal relationship with the audience. Similar to the bard's relationship with his patron, the reciter must convince his audience to invest in the story and allow for the suspension of disbelief. In *St Nicholas* (1997) Conor McPherson makes this imperative the core issue of the play. His monologist is a theatre critic who over the course of two substantial acts, attempts to convince his audience of the reality of vampires, knowing through the reciprocity of the performance, the difficulty this endeavour would encounter with a modern audience:

There's always going to be a smugness about you listening to this.  
As we all take part in this convention.  
And you will say, 'These vampires are not very believable, are they?'<sup>54</sup>

The reciter in *St. Nicholas* relies on the authority of his tale, the cadences of his words which create the 'magic' of his recital. Yeats had referred to cadence as "the first

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<sup>52</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>53</sup>Scott T. Cumming, "Homo Fabulator: the Narrative Imperative in Conor McPherson Plays" in Eamonn Jordan (ed) *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), 308.

<sup>54</sup>Conor McPherson, "St Nicholas" in *Four Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999), 160.

and last of poetic virtues”<sup>55</sup>. In each of his early plays, McPherson traces a trajectory “from credible to incredible”<sup>56</sup> playing upon the audience’s willingness to undergo the shamanic spell of the recitation. In Marina Carr the reciter can be an interpolated narrator such as Millie’s role in *The Mai*, who addresses the audience directly, giving the mythological origins of the play’s setting: “Owl Lake comes from the Irish, *loch cailleach oíche*, Lake of the Night Hag or Pool of the Dark Witch.”<sup>57</sup> Also the reciter can be an ensemble character, interjecting the conventions of the poetic elegy mid-scene, as occurs with Josie Swane’s turn to balladry in *By the Bog of Cats*:

By the Bog of Cats I dreamed a dream of wooing.  
I heard your clear voice to me a-calling  
That I must go through it be my undoing.  
By the Bog of Cats I’ll stay no more a-rueing.<sup>58</sup>

Carr repeats the convention of the interjected ballad in *Ariel* (2002) when family patriarch Fermoy Fitzgerald gives an account of ‘When You Were Sweet Sixteen’<sup>59</sup> to Ariel on her birthday. McPherson’s pub denizens in *The Weir* (1997) are acutely aware of their status as reciters and balladeers, regaling the recently relocated Valerie with their stories of local hauntings and fairy forts, playing music for the “Germans” in the summer time and utilizing a self-consciously lyrical form of Hiberno-English. Carr and McPherson continue the bardic art of the musical reciter, knowing instinctively that “the art of public recitation stands at the point of intersection between literature and music.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>56</sup>Scott T. Cumming, “Homo Fabulator: the Narrative Imperative in Conor McPherson Plays” in Eamonn Jordan (ed) *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), 306.

<sup>57</sup>Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 147

<sup>58</sup>Marina Carr, “By the Bog of Cats” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 270.

<sup>59</sup>Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>60</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 84.

## CHAPTER 2: THE MYTHICAL METHOD – MARINA CARR & BARDIC DISCOURSE

... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. [...] Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step towards making the modern world possible for art

T.S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order and Myth”.

What Eliot described as the mythical method was the artistic technique of using the past to construct meaning for a present which had become inchoate at the level of the individual. Deploying myth as an ordering principle reconnects the individual to the collective by stressing shared narratives and themes across generations. In reacting to their collective trauma in the wake of colonisation, the bards created understanding through recourse to Irish mythology and the Ossianic cycles. Equally Marina Carr’s disenfranchised heroines react against a fractured modernity by finding solace in recessive myths. These myths may, in the case of *The Mai*, be passed on to successive generations through oral storytelling, but also as in the case of *Ariel*, *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats*, may be present from the start in the form of ritual determinants which influence character action at the unconscious level. Often characters in Carr’s drama will articulate a sense of inescapable fate. In *Ariel*, Elaine acknowledges fate’s role in her family saga as a “weave” decided before birth “and then you’re flung to earth wud this weave and this twist in the weave thah some calls fate.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 61.

The strategies of a realist discourse, which call for observance of causality of plot and psychological fidelity, are discarded by Carr in favour of “mythical, larger-than-life presences that threaten to explode the parameters of realism.”<sup>62</sup> The protagonist of *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester Swane, cannot be read as a psychologically ‘real’ character. Her opening admission that she often “[feels] things from some other world betimes”<sup>63</sup> positions her as someone caught between two temporal spaces, one ancient and one modern. Carr uses a series of disruptive presences to further diminish any realist claims, as throughout the play “the troubled Hester Swane is disturbed by the phantom-like Ghost Fancier, forewarned by the mysterious creature Catwoman and visited by the spectre of Joseph, the dead brother she murdered out of jealousy and spite.”<sup>64</sup> Discussions on Carr’s work often highlight the use of liminal spaces that blur the distinctions between the modern world and the otherworld of myth and ghosts. In *By the Bog of Cats* the bog itself is “always shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye.”<sup>65</sup> M. K. Martinovich discusses the bog as representative of Hester’s psyche:

The ancient landscape of the bog makes up this realm, which is the threshold between the living and the dead, the natural and the unnatural. The bog is not only a haunted liminal space, but also a psychological space, where layers of Hester’s psyche can unfold.<sup>66</sup>

The character of Hester is thus conflated with her environment with the latter acting as an impressionistic zone of the imagination. Through this association Carr performs the bardic function of wedding principal and territory, as Caball relates: “A lord’s

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<sup>62</sup>Cathy Leeney, Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: “Before Rules Was Made”* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), xvi.

<sup>63</sup>Marina Carr, “By the Bog of Cats” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 265.

<sup>64</sup>M. K. Martinovich, “The Mythical and the Macabre. The Study of Greeks and Ghosts in the Shaping of the American premiere of *By the Bog of Cats*” in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: “Before Rules Was Made”* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 120.

<sup>65</sup>Carr, “By the Bog of Cats”, 267.

<sup>66</sup>Martinovich, *The Theatre of Marina Carr: “Before Rules Was Made”*, 120.

rule was metaphorically sanctioned by the notion of his marriage to the ... figure of the territory in question.”<sup>67</sup> Hester’s inscription in her environment has the bardic sanction and becomes not only her birthright, but her inheritance in the traditional sense. To remove Hester from her bog would be tantamount to destroying, once again the bardic heritage of the native order. Hester’s resistance to her removal fulfils the tragic conditions of the play which Carr bases on Medea’s banishment from Corinth. Hester cannot fathom a life without her land, and the arc of the narrative proceeds in a series of warnings to quit the bog which Hester cannot or will not heed: “I’m goin’ nowhere. This here is my house and my garden and my streth of the bog and no wan’s runnin’ me out of here”<sup>68</sup>. Hester’s status as one of Ireland’s indigenous itinerants places her in the position of the displaced bard in the wake of the collapse of patronage in 1600. Delargy refers to this new class as “ragged sons-of-learning [*who*] introduced tales of literary origin into the districts in which they led a roving and restless life.”<sup>69</sup> Hester Swane is the contemporary embodiment of this itinerant folk-poet in search of a literary inheritance. She continually reminds those around her of her itinerancy and her inheritable right to the Bog:

I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I’ll end me days. I’ve as much right to this place as any of yees, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held yees. And as for me tinker blood, I’m proud of it. It gives me an edge over all of yees around here, allows me see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are.<sup>70</sup>

Melissa Sihra implicates Marina Carr herself in the role of the modern bard through the use of the incantatory properties of language in much of her work: “Like Big Josie

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<sup>67</sup>Marc Caball, *Poets and Politics. Continuity and Reaction in Irish Poetry 1558-1625* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), 24.

<sup>68</sup>Marina Carr, “By the Bog of Cats” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 268.

<sup>69</sup>James H. Delargy, “The Gaelic Story-Teller”, *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1945): 177-221

<sup>70</sup>Carr, “By the Bog of Cats”, 289.

Swane, Carr can be described as a word “stitcher”. [Carr’s] reverence for the word positions her intrinsically in a tradition where orality or that ‘yearning for the bardic [and] a hunger for stories’ is ingrained.”<sup>71</sup> Carr, like Joyce before her, knew the value of interjecting traditional orality into a modernist literary frame. The resulting hybrid form opens up the representative range of language giving precedence to heteroglossia over univocal realism, preferring polysemous narrative to traditional causality. Carr often uses extreme juxtapositions of mythical referents with contemporary details, *Ariel* for instance grafts contemporary pop culture references: “last a the Mohicans”<sup>72</sup> and “Billie Hollida”<sup>73</sup> onto a classical family tragedy – Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis* in this instance. In *The Mai* (1998) Carr had introduced a more prosaic domesticity on which to pitch her mythology. At an early point in act two, Robert in a conciliatory gesture presents Mai with a copy of cosmopolitan magazine from which Mai reads an extract detailing contemporary cosmetic and sexual mores:

The Mai: [...] The zipless fuck and how to achieve it – How to take off seven pounds in seven days – And here’s a recipe for peach flan with double cream. I suppose that’s to put back on the seven pounds you lost.<sup>74</sup>

Christopher Murray described the type of hybrid drama in *The Mai* as a conflation of the “mythic and the trite”<sup>75</sup> approximating a return to nineteenth century melodrama. But Carr’s mythical method disrupts any easy claim to realism, as successive generations of women of the same family succumb to a mythic aboulia. Clare Wallace

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<sup>71</sup>Melissa Sihra, “A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*” in Eamonn Jordan (ed) *Theatre Staff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), 265.

<sup>72</sup>Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>74</sup>Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 154.

<sup>75</sup>Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 237.

describes their condition as a “spectral legacy” bequeathed by matriarch Grandma Fraochlán’s “imaginative archive of fantasies and far-fetched stories.”<sup>76</sup> The matriarch in this instance is pitched in the role of bardic storyteller indoctrinating successive generations in her *Aisling*<sup>77</sup> dream of intercession with a mythic figure:

The Duchess told me me father was the Sultan of Spain and that he’d hid The Duchess and meself on Fraochlán because we were too beautiful for the world... and I believed her and watched on the cliffs every day for the Sultan of Spain. And at the end of every summer the Sultan would not have arrived and at the end of every summer The Duchess’d say, it must’ve been next Summer he meant.<sup>78</sup>

The Mai, Beck and Connie are helplessly immersed in the same dream, realised as a prince fantasy:

THE MAI: [...] I used to dream that a dark-haired prince would come across the waves on the wings of an albatross and he’d take me away to a beautiful land never seen or heard of before and he’d love me as no girl had ever been loved.

BECK: My prince had a white horse.

CONNIE: Mine had a chariot with golden bells that could sing my name.<sup>79</sup>

Anthony Roach refers to the communal dream of the women as the “magic stitch” of shared memory, referring to “the thread of affiliation which binds Grandma

Fraochlán, the Mai and Millie together across time, space and the absence of death.”<sup>80</sup>

The act of sharing creates a communal identity, one in which the quotidian reality of the Mai’s modern home is diminished through the spell of storytelling. The myth of

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<sup>76</sup>Clare Wallace, “Authentic Reproductions: Marina Carr and the Inevitable” in Eamonn Jordan (ed) *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>77</sup>For a detailed account of the Aisling genre see the chapter “The Aisling” in Daniel Corkery’s *The Hidden Ireland* cited above.

<sup>78</sup>Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 169.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>80</sup>Anthony Roche, “Women on the Threshold” in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: “Before Rules Was Made”* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 41.

origin takes over as the play increasingly moves into a mythopoetical dreamscape: “This proliferation of myths of origin to supplement ‘reality’ is crucial to the course of the play.”<sup>81</sup> Supplementing reality with fantasy is paramount to the disruption of Anglo-European realism. Kiberd applies this paradigm to postcolonial Irish literature as a whole, arguing towards the inevitability of this hybrid form of the mythical method:

This method has been shown to have been implicit in many texts of the Irish revival, especially the early plays of the Abbey theatre, whose writers were among the first to grasp that fantasy, untouched by any sense of reality, is only a decadent escapism, while reality, unchallenged by any element of fantasy, is a merely squalid literalism.<sup>82</sup>

The resulting method is highly complementary to the bardic tradition which prefers strategies of folkloric narrative to enlightenment dialectics. Zimmermann discusses the performative elements of folklore, according it the function of a bard: “‘Folklore’ consists ... of ready-made plots, of codified ways of putting together basic narrative elements ... and of manners of performing them in face-to-face communication.”<sup>83</sup> The performance element prefigures a bardic mediator, a community figure capable of addressing the collective with the myth: “Myth is what is social, what is common, what pertains to the whole tribe, to the whole community.”<sup>84</sup> Throughout Carr’s oeuvre we are presented with a mediator in the form of a bardic figure, exclusively female, disenchanted with modernity and possessed of a lyrical register with which she evokes a mythological folk-history. We see this trope most fully evoked in *The*

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<sup>81</sup>Clare Wallace, “Authentic Reproductions: Marina Carr and the Inevitable” in Eamonn Jordan (ed) *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>82</sup>Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, (London: Vintage, 1996), 338.

<sup>83</sup>Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 11.

<sup>84</sup>David Green, “Ancient Myth and Poetry: A Panel Discussion” in Joseph Ronsley (ed) *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), 5.

*Mai* in which the character of Millie is represented as a liminal figure, part ensemble player and part bardic commentator; she mostly interfaces with the audience, providing a link between the onstage events and the originating mythology which manipulates the subsequent actions. It is through Millie that the playwright contextualises the mythic referent underpinning the narrative and in the tradition of the bards, Millie performs it in a direct monologue:

MILLIE: Owl Lake comes from the Irish, *lock cailleach oíche*, Lake of the Night Hag or Pool of the Dark witch. The legend goes that Coillte, daughter of the mountain god, Bloom, fell in love with Bláth, Lord of all the flowers. So away she bounded like a young deer, across her father's mountain, down through Croc's Valley of Stone, over the dark witch's boglands till she came to Bláth's domain. There he lay, under an oak tree, playing his pipes, a crown of forget-me-nots in his ebony hair ... One evening approaching autumn Bláth told Coillte that soon he must go and live with the dark witch of the bog, that he would return in the spring, and the next morning he was gone. Coillte followed him and found him ensconced in the dark witch's lair. He would not speak to her, look at her, touch her, and heartbroken Coillte lay down outside the dark witch's lair and cried a lake of tears that stretched for miles around. One night, seizing a long-awaited opportunity, the dark witch pushed Coillte into her lake of tears. When spring came round again Bláth was released from the dark witch's spell and he went in search of Coillte, only to be told that she had dissolved.<sup>85</sup>

In Eilis Ní Dhuibhne's opinion, the folkloric story of 'Owl Lake' constitutes a "myth of seasonal death and resurrection"<sup>86</sup> which places Millie's narration in the bardic mode of a cyclical harvest-chronology. Kiberd refers to "cycles" in demonstrating how the mythical method undermines linear time:

By setting the past and present into dialectical tension, the mythic method undermined the European enlightenment's notion of time and linear progress. Instead, it evoked a world of cycles and spirals, which mocked the view of

<sup>85</sup> Marina Carr, "The Mai" in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 147.

<sup>86</sup> Eilis Ní Dhuibhne, "Playing the Story: Narrative Techniques in *The Mai*" in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 69.

history as a straight line and they set in its place another, very different model.<sup>87</sup>

One of the advantages of the cyclical approach was that it privileges no one position, no one point of view is allowed terminate a given discourse, since as with the harvest, a narrative string is allowed to die only to be reborn. “The linear time of the realist novel denied all this and sought to dispose of time in neat parcels, but Joyce, in restoring a sense of an Eternal now, also restored time’s mystery.”<sup>88</sup> In Marina Carr’s plays there is an all-pervading sense of recurrence, of the inevitability of the return of a recessive myth. In *The Mai*, Mai experiences the power of the mythic precedent in a dream she narrates to Robert. She dreams that at “the end of the world”<sup>89</sup> she’ll meet her abandoning husband Robert, again, only to murder him. Following their rebirth as children she encounters Robert in a pastoral setting, smiling, happy at their being reunited she waves to Robert only to be told that it is not their time and it won’t be for ““ thousands and thousands of years.”<sup>90</sup> She is fated to begin the search all over again: “in the distance I see a black cavern and I know it leads to nowhere and I start walking that way because I know I’ll find [him] there”<sup>91</sup>. And thus the myth perpetuates; the starting and finishing, searching and finding and then losing again. The closing image of the play situates the Mai by the window yearning for her reunion with the man fated to abandon her ad infinitum, Millie’s final address to the audience emphasises the mythic recurrence of this image: “The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again, and it goes on and on.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, (London: Vintage, 1996), 340.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 340.

<sup>89</sup>Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 126.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 184.

In *Ariel* (2002) a recessive myth is again patterned into the design of the play. Family patriarch Fermoy Fitzgerald has made a Mephistophelian pact in which he'll sacrifice his daughter when she turns sixteen in return for political advancement. Ariel, like the Mai, experiences a sense of mythic inevitability which like the Mai, comes to her in a dream. "I never thought I'd make me sixteenth birthday" she confides on the evening of her birthday before discussing the "thing"<sup>93</sup> she fears, which comes to her as a recurring sentence or thought she experiences every night before falling asleep. The thought is of a girl in a graveyard. The fear is subsequently actualised when she is abducted and murdered later that night. Death and rebirth is structured into the dialectics of the set design itself, as Carr's stage-directions request that successive acts open and close with *Mors et Vita* (Death and Life) playing over the P. A. Fermoy Fitzgerald at one points appropriates the foundational narrative of life in death – the Christian resurrection theme – through the meta-reference to Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*. In referring to the painting Fitzgerald comments "the deah a Christ was by us, noh for us, and the resurrection a Christ was for heeself"<sup>94</sup>, reframing Christ's supreme act of redemption as a futile and solipsistic gesture.

Finally in Marina Carr's latest play, *Marble* (2009), the mythic referent that weighs upon the central female protagonist is in this instance the dream of 'marble' – a metaphor for a pre-modern simplicity. Carr's artwork and set design for the Abbey premiere included prints of De Chirico landscapes featuring classically proportioned buildings and a central marble sarcophagus of a reclining woman<sup>95</sup>. Modern material life is depicted as "an awful repetition of nights and days and days and nights."<sup>96</sup> As

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<sup>93</sup>Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>95</sup>See the cover art on the first edition of *Marble*, published by The Gallery Press cited below.

<sup>96</sup>Marina Carr, *Marble* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2009), 40.

Catherine's fantasy of marble becomes increasingly real, she finds herself rejecting modernity in favour of the aesthetic world of her dreams. In a climactic exchange with her husband, Catherine lists and rejects her bourgeois lifestyle: "House, jobs, children, art galleries, theatres, stadiums, wine bars, trees, mountains, birds, for God's sake, who can possibly believe in the fact of a bird?"<sup>97</sup> Against an insubstantial modernity, Catherine prefigures the myth of Troy: "I walk this city and all I see is scaffolding, building, building, building, an avalanche of warrens and rat holes to stuff us in, and all I can think of is Troy."<sup>98</sup> Catherine's idiom in this instance approximates that of the elegy, and "Like a true bard ... laments the fact that modern man has lost his spiritual identity because he has stopped dreaming and imagining."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Marina Carr, *Marble* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, "Yeats and the Bardic Tradition", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1994): 89-101 Accessed: 17/05/2010 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25512989>

### CHAPTER 3: THE CARNIVAL BARD

M. M. Bakhtin writing in *Rabelais and His World* presents a discussion of the carnival as an unofficial world, a world parallel to and often in opposition to the traditional order. Predicated on subversion of hierarchies and existing primarily in non-literate forms such as folklore, song, dance and the images of the grotesque and the underworld, the carnival has obvious and pertinent parallels with the bardic tradition. Edmund Spencer had described bardism as tending to “[celebrate] what the English considered wrong. Such themes were not suitable for poetry, and could be all the more dangerous as the Irish were inordinately addicted to narratives (scéal: news or story).”<sup>100</sup> Spencer’s comments positions the Bard as a destabilizing entity in the English estimation. The carnival, equally, undermines political control, usurping official roles for the duration of the carnival: “Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals.”<sup>101</sup>

At the heart of the carnival is the celebration of the body in all its material essence. Bakhtin had referred to this body-centrality as the material bodily principle: “that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life.”<sup>102</sup> The base and the material are zones of exaggeration and interdiction, discourse is reversed, what was marginal is centralised and vice versa. In this way the body loses its private, egotistic function<sup>103</sup> and becomes a folk body, the body of the people and its grotesque features are celebrated. In bardic satire, a particularly potent tract would

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<sup>100</sup>Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>101</sup>Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid.,19

bring attention to a blemish or make known a physical disfigurement in the manner of a grotesque image; in the case of a king, his esteem would be diminished, he would be carnivalised and brought low: “A king was expected to be free from blemishes, and any type of physical impairment could result in the loss of sovereignty”<sup>104</sup>. Red Raftery in Marina Carr’s *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000) lives in fear of having his blemish made known, he understands the satiric imperative that “destriys [*sic*] a man’s good name and reputation”<sup>105</sup>. His blemish in this instance is the incest he had practiced with his daughter Dinah. As a consequence of his mistreatment of Dinah, Raftery suffers degradation in the manner of two forms of satiric invective, the making known of physical impairment<sup>106</sup>: “Ya’ve a stoop in your shoulders and a hop in your carriage”<sup>107</sup> / “the way the flesh rides down [your] face”<sup>108</sup> and through comparison with animals<sup>109</sup>: “cloven toes”<sup>110</sup> / “big stumpy jaw a black molars”<sup>111</sup>. Red understands that his position as patriarch and leader is under threat from Dinah and as a corrective action he brings his youngest daughter Sorrel, the victim of his latest rape, under patronage by offering her the deeds to the farm and a cheque for “twenty grand”<sup>112</sup>. In this manner Red Raftery, acting as chief and benefactor, brings about an end to this form of bardic malediction through a restorative act. An act that renews relationship between patron and poet: “Over and above the ability of satire to heal itself is the opportunity afforded by the combination of complaint and reconciliation

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<sup>104</sup>Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2008),18.

<sup>105</sup>Marina Carr, *On Raftery’s Hill*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2000), 20.

<sup>106</sup>McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 15.

<sup>107</sup>Carr, *On Raftery’s Hill*, 27.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, 31

<sup>109</sup>McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 33.

<sup>110</sup>Carr, *On Raftery’s Hill*, 35.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 51

common in the body of Irish bardic poetry – for the continual renewal of the poet / lord relationships.”<sup>113</sup>

The theatre critic in Conor McPherson’s *St Nicholas* functions as a latter-day bard; his satires being feared by all: “everyone [was] afraid of what I’d write.”<sup>114</sup> He is a deeply grotesque figure, revelling in his debauched lifestyle and his seemingly endless transgressions: “I started rows with directors in pubs. I walked out of plays ten minutes before the end” / “[A] fat fuck[er] rolling around in the mud.”<sup>115</sup> He emphasises the body and bodily functions in his descriptions of others, constantly evoking excess in relation to alcohol, food and sex and constantly alluding to the threat of his pun and the power of his epitaph to hurt reputations. As a writer, he is in the mould of Rabelais, carnivalising life as Rabelais did with *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, and threatening at any moment to disfigure by satire should his readers not believe in the substance of his narrative:

I hereby deliver myself up body and soul, belly and bowels, to a hundred thousand basketfuls of raving demons, if I have lied so much as once throughout this book. By the same token, may St. Anthony sear you with his erysipelatus fire ... may Mahomet’s disease whirl you in epileptic jitters ... may the festers, ulcers and chancres of every purulent pox infect, scathe, mangle and rend you, entering your bumgut as tenuously as mercuralized cow’s hair ... and may you vanish into an abyss of brimstone and fire, like Sodom and Gomorrah, if you do not believe implicitly what I am about to relate in the present *Chronicles*.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup>Michelle O Riordan, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), 121.

<sup>114</sup>Conor McPherson, “St Nicholas” in *Four Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999), 138.

<sup>115</sup>*Ibid.*, 139

<sup>116</sup>Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 164.

Disfigurements, dismemberments and carnivalised bodies abound throughout the drama of both Marina Carr and Conor McPherson. The tale of the ‘nine-fingered fisherman’ forms a mythological leitmotif in *The Mai*, with Grandma Fraochlán recounting with relish, the details of the hypothermia: “his skin... livid purple from the feezin’ sea”<sup>117</sup>, which results in the lose of the digit. The amputated finger subsequently is worn “like a trophy” around the neck of the fisherman. The severed finger becomes an object of fascination throughout the community “Boats would row up alongside his boat and ax to see his hand and ax to tell how he had come to lose that finger though they’d heard that story a hundred times already because people never tire of great love stories.”<sup>118</sup> In Conor McPherson’s *The Seafarer*, Ivan recounts with Bardic aplomb, the legend of Morris Macken:

IVAN: [...] He was electrocuted up in a house where he was working in Santry. There was a tremendous bang! Blew him right across the room, I believe. One of his fillings ended up in his ear. Somehow he survived. They let him go home out of Beaumont Hospital, and then there was a fire in his house that night! And he was gone!<sup>119</sup>

Bernadette Bourke traces Marina Carr’s satiric, carnival vein, back to Synge, making comparisons between the grotesque imagery in both playwrights: “At times, one detects in Carr’s work grotesque allusions which seem like deliberate appropriations from Synge”<sup>120</sup>. The bardic precedent of disfiguring the face of an authority figures appears in both *The Playboy* and *By the Bog of Cats* where “the man [who] bit the

<sup>117</sup> Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 182.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 20.

<sup>120</sup> Bernadette Bourke, “Carr’s ‘Cut-Throats and Gargiyles’” in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: “Before Rules Was Made”* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 135.

yellow lady's nostril on the northern shore" of the former translates into Big Josie's act of "biting the nose off a woman who dared to look at her man"<sup>121</sup> in the latter.

This manner of graphic bodily writing, described by Bakhtin as grotesque realism, "makes no pretence to renunciation of the earth, or independence of the earth and the body"<sup>122</sup> and is therefore all-inclusive and cosmic in scope. Grotesque realism observes no boundaries; death itself is a liminal zone and as such the grotesque image mocks death's claims to finality and closure. Marina Carr's dramatic idiom is strongly aligned with a grotesque exuberance in which the boundaries between life and death are far from being fixed and immutable. Carr presents a succession of heroines aligned with ghosts and in communion with the afterlife. Often it is a sibling or child that haunts; in *Portia Coughlan* it is the protagonist's twin brother Gabriel, in *Ariel* the mysterious childhood death of James becomes a haunting refrain for his mother Frances, presaging the later death of Ariel on her sixteenth birthday. In *The Mai* the Mai herself metaphorically dies at the close of each act, as noted by reviewer David Callaghan.<sup>123</sup> In *On Raftery's Hill* it is suggested that Shalome and Red have "ruined" the hill through past transgressions which turn out to have been incestual in origin. In *By the Bog of Cats* "Carr uses the theatrical convention of a ghost and a 'ghost fancier' to tell her tragic story of a despairing, heartbroken and sorrowful individual."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>Bernadette Bourke, "Carr's 'Cut-Throats and Gargiyles'" in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 135.

<sup>122</sup>Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>123</sup>David Callaghan, "[Untitled Review of The Mai]" *Theatre Journal* no. 3 (1997): 373-375 accessed 10/05/2010 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3208662>

<sup>124</sup>M. K. Martinovich, "The Mythical and the Macabre. The Study of Greeks and Ghosts in the Shaping of the American premiere of *By the Bog of Cats*" in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 126.

The carnivalisation of death has a long history in Irish folk customs. Writing in *My Man Jack: Bawdy Tales from Irish Folklore* Michael J. Murphy gives account of a tradition known as mobbing, which he defines as “the practice once common at wakes of exchanging uninhibited satirical and sarcastic repartee in a contest of wit.”<sup>125</sup> Epitaphs would be exchanged among participants, in the bardic spirit of ‘making known a blemish’, such invective took the form of satirical names: “Piss agin the wind; Meely-mouth-a-tubber-guts; Stop the tide with a pitchfork.”<sup>126</sup> Some of the appellations had obvious sexual connotations, such as “push-pole, a length of timber used to haul a threshing mill, referred, in this context, [*pertains*] to the penis.”<sup>127</sup> In addition, fertility rituals often attended death, in the manner of wake games, one such game “Marrying Out”<sup>128</sup> was a carnivalization of the institutions of marriage and priestly investiture. Murphy includes an account of a wake in the open-air, involving the ‘observance’ of the wake-games by the deceased in order that “the dead person [*could see*] life propagating and continuing.”<sup>129</sup> The preparation of the corpse for burial in this instance was seen as the opposite of a birth, and the body through the putrefaction process of death, fertilises the soil contributing once again to the life-cycle. Bernadette Bourke notes how Carr treats the grave as a ‘womb’ and works her dramaturgy similar to the corpse in attendance at the wake-game, through a constant cycling of death and rebirth:

Marina Carr goes full circle. She reworks the folk belief in the earth as grave and womb, that ‘swallows up and gives birth at the same time’, embracing and defeating death simultaneously. Carr’s doomed heroines return through

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<sup>125</sup>Michael J. Murphy, *My Man Jack: Bawdy Tales from Irish Folklore* (Dingle: Brandon Publishing, 1989), 18)

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

suicide to their natural element, to the womb from whence they came, which is the bog for Hester Swane in *By the Bog of Cats*.<sup>130</sup>

The bog in *By the Bog of Cats* works similarly to the Belmont River in *Portia Coughlan* and the lake in *Ariel*, literally it swallows, submerges and kills. But death and dead bodies are never images of finality in Carr's dramaturgy as they are constantly portrayed as "stravagin' the shadows"<sup>131</sup>. The central image of *Portia Coughlan* is the drowned body of the eponymous heroine, retrieved from the river where her twin brother Gabriel had gone to his doom fifteen years previous. Her affinity with the water and with death had been perhaps over-determined in the first act, as at one point she gives the account of her and her twin brother's birth "Came out of the womb holdin' hands – When God was handin' out souls he must've got mine and Gabriel's mixed up, aither that or he gave us just the one between us and it went into the Belmont River with him"<sup>132</sup>. The rest of the act becomes a trajectory towards Portia's own death by drowning. In *By the Bog of Cats* Hester's death is never anything other than an inevitable outcome of the tragic dramaturgy which "opens with a vivid image of bloody death, and the prediction that more will follow before the cycle is complete."<sup>133</sup> Hester is told at various times to 'quit' the bog before it is too late – advice that she can never heed, as with Carr's other tragediennes, Hester's identity is inscribed in her environment, in this case the bog which acts as metaphor of liminality, decomposition and rejuvenation. Hester dies calling out for the mother that had abandoned her in her childhood as she performs a suicidal act of disfigurement through the cutting out of her own heart. The image of

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<sup>130</sup>Bernadette Bourke, "Carr's 'Cut-Throats and Gargiyles'" in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 132.

The bog in *By the Bog of Cats* works similarly to the Belmont River in *Portia*

<sup>131</sup>Marina Carr, "By the Bog of Cats" in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 321.

<sup>132</sup>Marina Carr, "Portia Coughlan" in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 211.

<sup>133</sup>Bourke, "Carr's 'Cut-Throats and Gargiyles'", 139.

the corpse with the heart carved out and laid atop her body is described by Monica as “some dark feathered bird”<sup>134</sup> an image equally transcendent and grotesque. We recall the Ghost Fancier’s cryptic response to Hester’s questioning of which “ghost” he’s “ghoulin” for from the first scene. “I’m ghoulin’ for a woman be the name of Hester Swane” he replies to their mutual consternation. But the ghost-fancier can’t determine if it’s sunrise or sunset, as it’s “the hour when it could be aither dawn or dusk, the light bein’ so similar”<sup>135</sup> which sets a timeframe of indeterminacy, getting light or getting dark, living or dying – it is a site of flux, of liminality. Similarly in *The Weir*, Conor McPherson introduces a liminal world, suspended between day and night, in which a succession of pub patrons describe their encounters with ghosts. Beginning with near-fabulation with regards to Jack’s story about Maura Nealon’s haunting by fairies; each successive speaker demonstrates a diminishing remove from the haunting in question. Finbar uses a narrative frame discussing events that happened to a neighbour. Jim discards his frame but blames his encounter with a ghost on fever. The hauntings in each case are dismissed as “old cod”<sup>136</sup>, that is until Valerie’s revelation that she is literally haunted by the real ghost of her own daughter. Death, Valerie discloses, has traversed her life in a material manner that rationalism cannot dismiss.

Cathy Leeney has suggested that Carr’s early triumvirate of *Ariel*, *On Raftery’s Hill* and *By the Bog of Cats* “are linked in a dramaturgy concerned with our twenty-first-century world: the anxieties that arise through our love / hate relationship with planet Earth, and how the human family has its feet in the filth and its head in the stars”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup>Marina Carr, “By the Bog of Cats” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 341

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>136</sup>Conor McPherson, “The Weir” in *Plays Two* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2004), 53.

<sup>137</sup>Cathy Leeney, Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: “Before Rules Was Made”* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), xxv.

The juxtaposition of filth and stars serves the same purpose as the closing image of *By the Bog of Cats* – that of the conflation of the transcendental with the grotesque. The linguistic register of Carr’s characters is equally a mixture of the sublime and the decrepit. In *Ariel*, Fermoy Fitzgerald sets out the vision of heaven he intends to impart to the dying patients in hospital, a vision full of base metal and “brass-bodied angels”<sup>131</sup>. In *The Mai*, Millie the interpolated narrator of the play describes how the communication between family members had taken on the idiom of grotesque debasement in that “high language” quickly gives way to foul invective:

MILLIE: [...] We usually start with the high language. He’ll fling the Fourth Commandment at me, *HONOUR THY FATHER!* And I’ll hiss back, a father has to be honourable before he can be honoured, or some facetious rubbish like that. And we’ll pace ourselves like professionals, all the way to the last round, to the language of the gutter, where he’ll call me a fuckin’ cunt and I’ll call him an ignorant bollix! We’re well matched, neither ever gives an inch, we can’t, its life and death as we see it.<sup>138</sup>

Referring to the juxtaposition of vulgarities and rarefied speech as “life and death” positions Carr’s speech-patterns firmly in Bakhtin’s genre of the Billingsgate idiom. The Billingsgate refers to a form of mock-abuse with characteristics of renewal through the act of debasing. Bakhtin describes the speech-form as giving “a new meaning given to the old forms. For instance, when two persons establish friendly relations, the form of their verbal intercourse also changes abruptly; they address each other informally, abusive words are used affectionately, and mutual mockery is permitted.”<sup>139</sup> The Billingsgate is part of the broader discourse of grotesque debasement which has as its central image the material body’s lower stratum, the zone of the genitals which is the centre of ambivalence “since the lower stratum is not only

<sup>138</sup> Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>139</sup> Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 128.

a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore in the images of urines and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare”<sup>140</sup>. To debase, therefore, is to renew. In the folk culture of Ireland, grotesque debasement was firmly entrenched in the popular argot. M. J. Murphy recollects many of these turns of phrase in *My Man Jack*, noting that of the Irish peasantry “people used “hoor” and “bastard” as superlatives in the Elizabethan fashion and thought nothing of it.”<sup>141</sup> Bakhtin described a particular speech genre known as “mudslinging”<sup>142</sup>, a euphemism for besmirching with excrement or urine, such that “[its] debasing meaning was generally known and understood. We can find probably in every language such expressions as ‘I shit on you.’”<sup>143</sup> Equally mudslinging in this form was long established in bardic narrative. Roisin McLaughlin includes an extract from a satire, the target of which, receives invective in the form of debasement with excrement:

O miserly, stony Gilla Mo Laise,  
 you cheek of a rough grey heron of river bottoms,  
 you purple pelt, you shit on buttocks,  
 you moulting desert ram mounting deer.<sup>144</sup>

Bakhtin notes how those familiar with each other will often invoke the opposite image to the sentiment they wish to express through the recourse to grotesque debasement:

“It can be said that excrement represents bodies and matter that are mostly comic; it is the most suitable substance for the degrading of all that is exalted.”<sup>145</sup> In *The Weir*

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<sup>140</sup>Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 16.

<sup>141</sup>Michael J. Murphy, *My Man Jack: Bawdy Tales from Irish Folklore*. (Dingle: Brandon Publishing, 1989), 63.

<sup>142</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 148

<sup>143</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>144</sup>Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2008), 149.

<sup>145</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 151.

when Finbar Mack's overtures towards Valerie are discussed, Jack seizes on the married man's hypocrisy, referring to Finbar Mack as "only old shit"<sup>146</sup>. Similarly by the end of the play, having firmly established her position in the group dynamic, Jack likens male interest in Valerie to a "fly on a big pile of shite."<sup>147</sup> Speaking about herself in *The Mai*, Beck uses a carnival inversion of the Midas touch, in her self-expression "everything I touch turns to shite."<sup>148</sup> *The Seafarer* often dissolves into periods of prolonged grotesque realism in which degrading images only serve to reinforce friendships, renew familiar relations and vouchsafe the communal aspects of the men. Early in scene one of act one Richard solicits Sharky's assistance in going to the toilet. Excretion becomes the comic fulcrum as the younger sibling is forced to assist in the grotesque act:

RICHARD: [...] Would you let me do my toilet please, Sharky? For ... Jaysus' sake will you come out of me road?  
 SHARKY: (*off*). I am! Let me just wipe the seat...  
 RICHARD: (*storming in and ejecting SHARKY*): Come out of me road!<sup>149</sup>

Later in the play, Sharkey undergoes a quick succession of ritual humiliations, first in the form of Richard's making public Sharkey's blemish of 'cuckoldry', the ancient heptad on satire signals the ignominy of such disclosure: "Everyone is decorous until he is cuckolded."<sup>150</sup> Next it is disclosed that the man cuckolding Sharkey – Nicky Giblin – now drives his car. And then as a final humiliation, Richard directs his Brother to "take a basin of hot water down out to the back door of the lane"<sup>151</sup> and scrub away the "puke and piss" of alcoholic vomit and urine. Literally, Sharkey has

<sup>146</sup>Conor McPherson, "The Weir" in *Plays Two* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2004), 16.

<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>148</sup>Marina Carr, "The Mai" in *Marina Carr: Plays I* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 133.

<sup>149</sup>Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 6.

<sup>150</sup>Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*. (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>151</sup>McPherson, *The Seafarer*, 31.

been “besmirched” with urine. It is necessary that Sharky suffers such ritual debasement as a consequence of his high-minded action of “[not having] left the old Kaliber out”<sup>152</sup> i.e. for staying sober during the festive occasion, an act of grave transgression during any carnival as it implies separateness and unwillingness to partake in carnival excess. Grotesque debasement has as its central image the material body’s lower stratum, the zone of the genitals, which is the centre of ambivalence: “since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore in the images of urines and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare”<sup>153</sup>. To abuse, to mock and mudsling to excess and in the spirit of ambivalence is to carnivalise one’s target, to allow for reestablishment of friendly relations through recourse to humour and communal laughing: “Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people.... this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.”<sup>154</sup>

In this consideration of carnival precedents in the plays of Carr and McPherson, we can recognize how these elements work to cause a temporary destabilization of hierarchies, upsetting authorial power and provoking regeneration of relationships and attitudes through humour. There remains an important distinction, however, between the carnival and bardic discourse in relation to their respective temporal functions. The carnival with roots in ecclesiastic feasts is necessarily short-lived, existing as a rapid disintegration of order followed by the swift restoration of that order. Bardism on the other hand, saw itself as the true governing class and as such, assumed a

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<sup>152</sup>Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 28.

<sup>153</sup>Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 148.

<sup>154</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

juridical and martial function which resists closure and the carnival's emphasis on the restoration of the dominant order. The bardic tradition *was* the order. We see this imperative in both playwrights, in their open-endedness and their moral ambiguity. McPherson's confessors are caught between "mischief and morality"<sup>155</sup>, Carr's dramaturgy abrogates closure, preferring a continuous inversion of order beyond that of the carnival, as Bernadette Bourke argues: "Carr's version [*of carnival*] does not allow for such neat closure, but gyrates out of control leading to devastating consequences, and precluding the restoration of any but a 'botched' sort of order."<sup>156</sup> By interdicting the return to order precedence, Carr and likewise McPherson position their narratives as a parallel discourse to officialdom, threatening disorder and instability, contradicting the rule of law, and in the manner of the bards, "fomenting rebellions and outlawry."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup>Gerald C. Wood, *Conor McPherson Imagining Mischief*, (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003), 101.

<sup>156</sup>Bernadette Bourke, "Carr's 'Cut-Throats and Gargiyles'" in Cathy Leeney & Anna McMullan (eds) *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made"* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), 129.

<sup>157</sup>Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 49

## CHAPTER 4: BARDIC DISCOURSE & POST-COLONIAL THEORY

Bardism, given its historical associations with outlawry and subversion of colonial authority as demonstrated by Zimmermann and its function of writing the consciousness of a subjugated race, positions itself in the frame of the post-colonial writer. In chapter two we had looked at the mythical method as a new procedure adopted by the Irish writers in the twentieth century. With regard to Marina Carr's juxtaposition of mythic referents against a realist setting we can see how this might displace realism in favour of what Homi K. Bhabha had referred to as the third space of post-colonial literature, a space "that initiate[s] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation"<sup>158</sup>. The bardic imperative forces the marginal to contest the centre; ancient and modern must renegotiate their relationship with one another through the bard's "attempt[s] to fit the old mandarin forms to the needs of a new social order."<sup>159</sup>

This negotiation between ancient and modern forms results in a mutual compromise. Bardic writing as advocated by the revivalists chooses elements from both traditions, from colonial and pre-colonial. It shall be demonstrated that this compromise is in keeping with post-colonial theories on hybridity. Thomas Kinsella advises scholars to take a dual approach to Irish literary heritage if "the literature of the Irish tradition is to be fully understood."<sup>160</sup> He lists the characteristics of Irish literature's "dual character":

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<sup>158</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2004), 2.

<sup>159</sup>Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70.

<sup>160</sup>Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 5. Accessed on 05/05/2010 from <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=98412385>

Some features of its dual character are ... the responses in the two languages as the English language settled into an Irish environment; the parts played by translation, from a first coming to terms in the sixteenth century to its central role with Lady Gregory and Yeats; the changes for the last bardic poets, from their full integration in a stable society to a lonely questioning of their own relevance by isolated individuals.<sup>161</sup>

The change that befell the bardic order is equal to the experience across all theatres of colonisation in the seventeenth century regarding the subjugation of native governance, the imposition of a foreign language and indoctrination of the native in the coloniser's culture and art-forms. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o gives good account of the linguistic and social traumas performed by these aggrandizing acts in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). He speaks of the "mental universe"<sup>162</sup> of the native as a zone of cultural displacement in which the "colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition."<sup>163</sup> This is precisely the condition of the native intellectual in Ireland during the period of the Gaelic Literary Revival. The choice facing the revivalist was a simple and yet profound one: repeat the terms of the coloniser by writing in English and the received European genres, or rehabilitate the ancient artistry of the bards and the ancient Gaels. Yeats chose the hybrid route, celebrating the ancient sagas and praise-poems in the only language he knew – English. Other revivalists pointed out the irony in adopting such a procedure, "Douglas Hyde in *The Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland* (1894) ... pointed out that Ireland was ironically reflecting the culture of its enemy: it imitates England and yet apparently hates it."<sup>164</sup> But hybridity was more than just compromise or capitulation, it has been demonstrated that

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<sup>161</sup>Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 5. Accessed on 05/05/2010 from <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=98412385>

<sup>162</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (New Hampshire: Heinemann 1986), 16.

<sup>163</sup>*Ibid.*, 17

<sup>164</sup>Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, "Yeats and the Bardic Tradition", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1994): 89-101 Accessed: 17/05/2010 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25512989>.

hybridity amounts to a dialogue between two traditions, affecting coloniser as much as colonised, becoming “sites of cultural negotiation”<sup>165</sup>.

Irish compromise was expressed in bitter satire by Yeats’s charge to the middle-classes: “What need you, being come to sense / But fumble in a greasy till / And add the halfpence to the pence.”<sup>166</sup> His frustration is directed at the crass materialism and the compromised nationalism of the middle-classes, ostensibly at war with Britain but happy to propagate its values. Carr revisits Yeats’s sentiment in *Ariel*, when politician and patriarch Fermoy Fitzgerald bemoans colonisation by “the nation a shopkeepers.”<sup>167</sup> Fitzgerald reduces Britain’s conquest in Ireland to a taxonomic enterprise, a system of ‘shop keeping’ in which the native Irish played the role of clerk to their ‘shop keeping’ masters. “Look, the outsize ego a this nation is built on sand and wind, a few dramers, natin else”<sup>168</sup> Fermoy says, questioning the consolation of a native class, dispossessed of property and power and in the manner of the bards, left only an imagination with which to dream itself into being. Fitzgerald regards himself as a revisionist, with a plan to overhaul Irish subjectivity at the level of the imagination “We nade to re-imagine ourselves from scratch.”<sup>169</sup>

Dapper interloper, Mr. Lockhart, in Conor McPherson’s *The Seafarer* (2006) was portrayed as an Englishman in the Abbey Theatre’s premiere of the play in 2008. Lockhart’s power-play for Sharkey’s soul can be read as analogous to the English colonial endeavour to win the “mental universe” of the Irish. Equally the fawning

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<sup>165</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2004), 255.

<sup>166</sup>William Butler Yeats, “September 1913” in *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000), 86.

<sup>167</sup>Marina Carr, *Ariel* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>168</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*

over of Lockhart by the other men, his singular appropriation of the title ‘Mr’ and the general deference afforded him is representative of acceptance in the Gramscian manner, of the coloniser by the colonised. Using the bard a mediator with the past, the revivalists could ‘perform’ themselves as subjects outside of the subject position of colonised ‘other’. Bardic writing as demonstrated in chapter three was a parallel discourse, existing alongside the dominant English order throughout much of the period since the collapse of Gaeldom. Re-discovering the incantatory properties of bardic recital Yeats and others demonstrated how “the Irish bardic, ballad, and peasant traditions.... lifts intense poetic emotion out of the temporal and into an Orphic realm of sacred rite or mysterious ritual.”<sup>170</sup> According to Frantz Fanon the remembrance of the pre-colonial forms was the second phase in a tripartite struggle towards cultural rehabilitation of the native writer, “old legends [*would*] be reinterpreted on the basis of a borrowed aesthetic.”<sup>171</sup> But this promethean charge to the post-colonial writer begs the question of what to represent, since the native image had been inscribed by, and re-formed through, colonial education and foreign institutions so that it is difficult to know what was before and what came after the rupture. One of the legacies of the English dramatic grammar was the notorious stage ‘Irishman’, a concoction of racial stereotypes and buffoonery. But it was an immediate, identifiable trope and as such found a ready audience in Britain and America. Should the revivalist writer address these enormously receptive markets through the old forms or should he confound expectation and damage his literary scope? Declan Kiberd refers to this as the “dilemma”<sup>172</sup> facing the Irish dramatist, a choice of economic rationalism versus aesthetic nationalism. Again, the choice was

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<sup>170</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

<sup>171</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 159.

<sup>172</sup>Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, (London: Vintage, 1996), 136.

often split between both determinants resulting in a hybrid art-form. Many commentators perceive in Marina Carr a redeployment of the old stereotypes and ‘easy sentiments’ of the early Abbey Theatre, accusing her of caricaturing once again, the Irish for a foreign audience:

The dramatis personae of these plays specifically mark out figures of the poor which are overdetermined in their Irishry. Gross caricatures with no purchase on the experiences of today’s audiences, their appeal to the new consumer-Irish consensus lies in their appearance as ludicrous Manichaean opposites – the colonized simian reborn.<sup>173</sup>

Yet Marina Carr’s constant interrogation of identity and the fallacy of modern Irish materialism approaches the true Fanonian condition of “passionate research” directed by the earnest hope “of discovering ... beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others.”<sup>174</sup> We see this deployment in Hester’s pyrrhic searching for the story of her mother in *The Bog of Cats*, the female propensity towards redemptive fairytales in *The Mai* and Catherine’s dreams of a primordial past in *Marble*. It is the bard’s quest to rehabilitate communal identity through the performance of the imagination. Critics such as Fintan O Tool similarly trace this line through McPherson’s drama, describing him as:

following the lead of ‘the epic stories of the old Gaelic tradition’, [*in which*] the writer transform[s] his dream into ‘a contemplation of narrative itself,

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<sup>173</sup>Cathy Leeny, “Ireland’s Exiled Women Playwrights: Teresa Deevy and Marina Carr in Shaun Richards (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 253.

<sup>174</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 226.

exploring the extraordinary willingness of an audience to be led step by step from the familiar to the outrageous.<sup>175</sup>

The reciters in the Irish theatre tradition perform a national imperative to restore the sanctuary of the oral form to a contemporary audience, reminding those new witnesses of the storyteller's ability to return a sense of mystery to a modern materialist present, and this too is the message of the critic in Conor

McPherson's *St Nicholas*:

But we never seem to think for a moment that nature is magic.  
 We view nature scientifically. We can predict its laws.  
 But our pride in doing this blinds us. Blinds us to the simple fact:  
 We don't know why there are laws at all.  
 We may know that the earth goes around the sun. And we may know that this  
 is due to 'gravity'.  
 But not one of us knows why there is gravity. So don't sit there and cast  
 judgement on the credibility of what I say, when you don't even know why  
 you aren't floating off your seats.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup>Fintan O'Toole, "Shadows Over Ireland", *American Theatre* (1998). Volume: 15. Issue: 6 p 19  
 quoted in Gerald C. Wood, *Conor McPherson Imagining Mischief*, (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2003),  
 37.

<sup>176</sup>Conor McPherson, "St Nicholas" in *Four Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1999), 161.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In a moment of elegy befitting a bard, Yeats wrote the following: “the bardic order, with its perfect artifice and imperfect art, had gone down in the wars of the seventeenth century, and poetry had found shelter amid the turf-smoke of the cabins.”<sup>177</sup> His despair at the loss of a literary art in the same venerable idiom of the artificer performs the redemption of the craft, exactly as the bards had done through the eulogising of their defeat. This is the elegiac disposition that remains to this day a pre-eminent influence in the Irish dramatic idiom, an idiom Eagleton had described as the “bathetic gap”<sup>178</sup> referring to the gap of realism in the Irish literary tradition. The over-determined reverence for what is lost and the pathos of the language used to record it is performed over and over again, through the disinherited women of Marina Carr and the alienated monologists of Conor McPherson. Carr sums up the condition in the closing refrain of *The Mai*, with Millie’s elegy for her mother’s tragic condition: “The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again, and it goes on and on till I succumb and linger among them there in that dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song.”<sup>179</sup>

This dissertation has demonstrated the continuing legacy of bardic narrative to inspire, shape and mould Irish theatre to an ancient art form. Marina Carr’s mythic imperative is often deployed to ironic ends, using the ancient to interrogate the modern. She demonstrates through recessive mythologies the failures of the modern materialism to

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<sup>177</sup>Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>178</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 150.

<sup>179</sup>Marina Carr, “The Mai” in *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 184.

account for the spiritual life of a people – it is present in Catherine’s refusal of a consumerist lifestyle in *Marble*: “I refuse this grey nightmare with its ridiculous rules and its lack of primary colours.”<sup>180</sup> Her rejection is a contemporary reworking of Yeats’s paean to man’s loss of his spiritual centre in “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” (1889):

The Woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy;  
Of old the world on dreaming fed;  
Grey Truth is now her painted toy.<sup>181</sup>

But once the loss is announced the redemptive process can begin again. For as soon as the ancient bard eulogised the loss of their art through the same incantatory process the procedure was inured against its loss and the bardic imperative preserved.

McPherson’s reciters are self-consciously performative in regard to their roles as mediators between past and present, fantastic and banal. The musical is a part of speech, the sublime immersed in the grotesque. Lockhart performs a bardic counterpart to Sharkey in *The Seafarer*, using his speech as an incantation; he implores Sharkey to transcend his loss and pain through the condition of music:

At a certain point each day, music plays. It seems to emanate from the very sun itself. Not so much a tune as a heartbreakingly beautiful vibration in the sunlight shining down on and through all the souls. It’s so moving you wonder how you could ever have doubted anything as you think back on this painful life which is just a sad distant memory. Time just slips away in Heaven....<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup>Marina Carr, *Marble* (Meath: The Gallery Press, 2009), 60.

<sup>181</sup>William Butler Yeats, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd” in *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2000), 3.

<sup>182</sup>Conor McPherson, *The Seafarer* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 78.

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