

Articulating the Subject: Metamorphosis in Marina Carr's *The Mai*

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Marina Carr's plays have received criticism for their depiction of passive women, particularly the suicides in Carr's Midlands trilogy: *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan* and *By The Bog of Cats*. The women have been accused of 'disappointingly, throw[ing] in the towel by committing suicide' (Wallace 435). In this paper, through an interpretation of the metamorphoses and transformations of the central character of *The Mai*, I will argue that the character does, in fact, have her own agency, and that her suicide can be reinterpreted as a creative act.

Drawing on the legacy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the trope of metamorphosis offers both myth and the body as sites of creative potential which enable exploration of the creation of identity through cultural signification and corporeal performance. In *Woman and Nation* C.L Innes traces the increasing idealization of Irish woman in literature from the nineteenth century through to the cultural nationalism of the early twentieth century which employed the female body as metonymic substitute for Ireland. Traditionally, the traits attributed to woman were passivity, asexuality, and domesticity, naturalized through the connection between woman and land. Both state law and the Catholic Church enforced nationalist patriarchal discourse which objectified and controlled the female body. Indeed, Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution, which remains unaltered, enshrined woman's place in the home and marked her role as reproducer of the nation:

2.1. In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2.2. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. ('Constitution of Ireland')

The Mai is set in 1979, following a period when advances were made in the realm of women's rights with 'the establishment of an ad hoc committee on women's rights in 1968, which resulted in the establishment of the First Committee on the Status of Women in 1970 and the formation of the Council of the Status of Women in 1972' (Ferriter 667). The 1980s witnessed the rejection of referenda on the legalization of abortion (1983) and divorce (1986). However, the premiere of *The Mai* in 1994, following Mary Robinson's election as President in 1990 and further referenda, was situated in a period of positive change for women. Referenda in 1992 saw the rejection of the legalization of abortion but ratified amendments which would allow women free access to information and freedom to travel to another state for an abortion. Furthermore, a referendum on divorce, which was approved in 1995, continued the debate over the construction of women's roles as mothers and wives. *The Mai* engages with concerns over the control of women's bodies by national patriarchal discourse, and with the ways in which social norms inform and perpetuate acceptable identities and bodies and exclude those deemed improper. The Mai's decision to commit suicide can be interpreted as reaffirming control over her body through exclusion and silencing, but more interesting are the ways in which the Mai's suicide and metamorphoses transgress the prescribed limits of the female body's signification to inhabit a creative female corporeality.

In order to examine whether metamorphosis has the potential to offer something new and invigorating to Carr's play, I will employ Judith Butler's theories of performativity, rematerialization and abjection, and discuss the staging of the Mai's

metamorphoses in three productions: the play's premiere at the Peacock Theatre in 1994, the Abbey touring production of 1995, and the McCarter Theater's 1996 production. Through an application of Butler's work, I will address whether metamorphosis is simply compelled within social norms, reinforcing the idealized and passive Irish woman, or is an unsettling process, which has the potential to explore and subvert the creation of identity. Similarly, myth has a janus-faced potential as it can suggest alternatives yet operates within the ideological domain, naturalizing its own agenda. I will argue that myth needs to be critically self-aware if it is to function as Paul Ricoeur's genuine myth 'which can be reinterpreted in terms of *liberation*' (485), rather than reinforcing ideology. The process of staging genuine myth requires engagement with the body as a 'site of intense inquiry, not in the hope of recovering an authentic female body unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full acknowledgement of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment' (Price and Shildrick 12). The body thus becomes a site of perpetual contest which can offer alternatives to textual significations and narratively created identity.

Carr's earlier plays, such as *Low in the Dark* (1989) and *Ullaloo* (1991), have an absurdist dramatic form, but *The Mai* appears to move towards realism. However, Carr disrupts the conventions of realism through her non-linear chronology and the use of a narrator, the Mai's daughter Millie. Like her mother, Millie is a ghostly figure, moving between roles in the porous world of the play, as both thirty-year-old narrator of her memories and sixteen-year-old participant in the action. Though *The Mai* marks a shift in Carr's theatrical form, some of the themes and concerns of her earlier work reappear. *Low in the Dark* subverts both the Virgin myth and the idea of woman as reproducer of

the nation with Bender and Binder's continuous delivery of babies, and these stereotypes of femininity and maternity are engaged with in *The Mai* and the plays which follow, *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats*. Myth is a continuous process of retelling which relies on reperformance, and Carr continually engages with inherited myths throughout her work, offering her own resignifications. This echoes Butler's suggestion in *Gender Trouble* that gender performativity can both reinforce gendered identities and destabilize them through repetition. *The Mai* does not focus on a specific narrative but instead draws from, and creates, mythic echoes with several sources. The play opens with the return of the Mai's¹ husband Robert, for whom she has been waiting several years, echoing both the defiant Electra waiting for the return of her brother and 'a reversal of the Odysseus legend viewed from the perspective of Penelope' (Wallace 438). There are references to the Cinderella story, but, as the play charts the disintegration of their marriage, these are ironic: Robert has been having an affair, which reveals his failings as the heroic prince. Act one closes with the temporal endpoint of the play, the image of the Mai lying dead in Robert's arms, and we expect the Mai's narrative to be silenced. However, she subverts linear chronology and expectation by being resurrected in act two in the first of her metamorphoses. Millie foreshadows the Mai's death through narration of the myth of Coillte, who was abandoned by her lover and dissolves into a lake:

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. (147)

¹ In order to reinforce the Mai's mythic status, she is referred to throughout the play as the Mai rather than just Mai.

This link enables us to interpret the Mai's death at the end of the play as a second metamorphosis where she too dissolves into Owl Lake, which functions as a space of creativity for her where no other is available.

Mythmaking needs to be a self-conscious process in order to avoid the pitfalls of repressive representations which fix rather than interrogate ideology. In *The Mai* the generations of Fraochlán women create and engage in a female world of storytelling. They retell and narrate the events and disappointments that have shaped their lives, and thus continually reshape their identities. The Fraochlán women narrate their own myths of origins in an effort to authenticate themselves and escape from the mundane realities of their lives, thus evoking a different future. *The Mai* engages with inherited narratives of myth, nation and gender, which are inscribed on the bodies of the women. All the women in *The Mai* are enthralled by romantic expectations and the desire for 'life to be huge and heroic and pure as in the days of yore' (Carr 163), but Western myths of romance expose the disjunction between the world of narratives and the women's material lives. The continual reperformance of gendered identities within the inherited significations of these myths gives rise to the reiteration of history across the generations from Millie to the Mai to Grandma Fraochlán. Robert's patriarchal claim that 'The Mai shuts down because the reality of everyday living is too complicated for The Mai' (Carr 172-3) pre-empts reactions to her suicide. The suggestion that her choice to leave the limits of the narratives and world she is trapped within means she no longer signifies, and belies her engagement with alternatives to the restrictive narratives of dominant national patriarchal discourse which placed woman within the home.

Roland Barthes suggests that ‘the very principle of myth: [is that] it transforms history into nature’ (129), and in order to negotiate a space to expose this process and create resignifications, Carr engages with inherited myths. This practice echoes Butler’s theory of performativity, where gender is ‘performatively constituted’ (*Gender* 34) and compelled by regulatory norms. Butler’s ideas on the constructed and performed body highlight the corporeal embodiment of the effects of power; bodies both produce and modify structures and themselves through the discursive realm of symbolic signification. Metamorphosis similarly brings identity into being through its discursive creation and corporeal performance. The Mai’s metamorphosis into a lake is created through both Millie’s narration of the Coillte myth and through the Mai’s movement from the stage, which is followed by sounds of water off-stage to suggest her transformation. However, just as Butler clarifies that performativity is compelled within cultural norms, we have to question whether metamorphosis can allow transformations outside these norms and grant agency in the act of creation. The act of performativity reiterates identity, but can metamorphosis offer something new, liberating or challenging? Butler suggests that rematerialization can offer a way out of the bind of merely reiterating ideological boundaries as it is an incomplete process and subversive potential is located in its instabilities. Butler suggests that rematerializations can produce ‘unexpected permutations’ (*Bodies* 127) of cultural norms and can offer continued engagement with these norms, where ‘[t]he culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its “natural” past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities’ (*Bodies* 127). Perhaps metamorphosis, as the conflict of woman’s subjectivity with the dominant order, functions in *The Mai* as an ‘unexpected permutation’ of cultural norms.

Marina Warner suggests that metamorphosis is a clash of two cultural hegemonies (17-18) and this is certainly born out in *The Mai* where this clash is exposed in the material realities of the female characters' lives. The potential of performativity and rematerialization offers a means of subversion for the Mai through her metamorphic body.

The best known female metamorphosis in Irish theatre is arguably that of the eponymous Cathleen ni Houlihan in Gregory's and Yeats's play of 1902. Her metamorphosis is an example of a repressive transformation, or materialization, which fixes her as an idealized woman-nation symbol. Her metamorphosis occurs off-stage, rendering her potential for threatening fixed boundaries of identity less troubling. By contrast, the Mai's first metamorphosis is her disruptive resurrection and return on stage in act two after we have seen her dead body held in Robert's arms at the close of act one. The performativity of the Mai's dead body unsettles the iconography of the tragic dead female body as silenced victim to reveal a potential for creative resignification. Her dead body reiterates her powerlessness and silence as an objectified individual. Yet it also creates an alternative of creative potential by disrupting the narratives which control her, specifically Robert's dream of the Mai: 'I dreamt you were dead and my cello case was your coffin' (Carr 125). The gendered roles of Christianity and Irish cultural nationalism, of the male who is sacrificed to enable Cathleen ni Houlihan and the nation to be reborn, are reversed by the iconography of the framed image of Robert with the Mai's body in his arms. Similarly, in the Peacock Theatre's 2007 production of Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow*, director Selina Cartmell chose to conclude with a pietà tableau, in which death is not an act of finality but part of a creative process. Susan Cannon Harris argues

that within a twentieth century Irish context women are not eligible for the role of sacrificial victim. According to Harris, the materiality of the dead female body makes her resistant to idealization, functioning instead as the 'female counterpart - the mother/ wife/ lover who accepts the sacrifice and whose body can then fulfill the more "natural" role of transforming that death into a rebirth' (4). The female corpse of the *pietà* is not a signified victim but an unsettling resignification whose materiality frustrates idealization and refuses the role of the Virgin Mary. The performativity of the Mai's body at the end of act one serves to question control over women's bodies through an unsettling mimicry of the Christ-like male body's ability to be born again. Materialization stabilizes, but through rematerialization there is the possibility for the destabilization of norms:

That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (*Bodies 2*)

The Mai's body becomes uncontrollable and threatening, a metamorphic body which unsettles the limits of identity and narrative convention through its rematerializations.

The generations of women presented on stage in *The Mai* expose the repeated acts of gender which they are forced to perform. In the 1994 premiere staging of *The Mai* in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, Millie literally re-performs Grandma Fraochlán when she stands behind and copies her movements as Grandma Fraochlán retells and relives dancing with her husband at the Cleggan Fair. However, the Mai disrupts the expected repetition and reperformance of history and tragic destiny when her dead body is resurrected at the start of act two. Her second metamorphosis at the end of the play further disrupts the inherited narratives and corporeal roles which the other women of the

play remain caught in. Millie's narration of the Coillte myth reveals that Coillte was pushed into the lake, but the Mai is in control of her reperformance of the myth. The Mai's first death is narrated by her daughter Millie, but the Mai seizes control of her narrative at the end of the play, creatively resignifying her own dead and metamorphosed body and thus evading the fate of tragedy, a fate where woman is silenced and as a passive victim cannot control her signification. The Mai resists being caught in a cycle of repetition and her performance suggests 'other possible worlds,' beyond the limits of the one she is contained within on stage. Rematerialization exposes the potential creativity of her culturally constructed body. Drawing on Kristeva, Butler addresses abject bodies which have been excluded from signification and deemed unliveable, confronting, 'those boundaries of bodily life where abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as "bodies"' (*Bodies* 15). The subversive spaces which the abject haunts function as sites of possible disruption, supporting Butler's suggestion that the abject can be 'a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility' (*Bodies* 3).

Butler's use of the term abject has a material and political focus in the historical specificity of the unliveable body. This ensures that the abject is not a universalizing term but one which is regulated by the changing cultural forms which exclude certain bodies and deny them access to political status and ontology. The Mai adopts the roles available to her through inherited myths and narratives of romance but these do not offer a life she deems liveable; having built her house at Owl Lake to accommodate herself and her children, she says, '[i]t's the kind of house you build when you've nowhere left to go' (Carr 158). The Mai's tolerance of this space as home suggests her initial acceptance of

legitimated and liveable ways of being. However, through her metamorphosis, she engages with what she is forced to exclude as unliveable, namely a space beyond the stage and outside the house. Metamorphosis articulates the process of identity formation and thus becomes a way of enabling the abject to bear disruptively on social norms by haunting them from the borders and erupting through unsettling corporeal transformations to suggest other corporeal ways of being.

The resurrection of the Mai's body in act two serves to disrupt normative categories through reinsertion of an abject body, a corpse or resurrected body, into the limits of social norms and liveable bodies. Through her reappearance we witness the signification of a delegitimated body in the symbolic, a speaking abject body. The Mai's reappearance allows her to operate within dominant forms and to offer resistance to them. She is an educated, financially independent woman, who as a property-owner and head teacher works within the dominant order, but she still has to fight to wrest control of her body from her husband, who we see play her body like a cello. Despite the referenda of the 1980s, the period from the play's setting in 1979 through to the production in 1994 saw some positive changes in the laws pertaining to woman's role as mother and wife, thus augmenting Irish women's ownership of their bodies. In her resurrected and metamorphosed body of act two, the Mai regains her creativity and recaptures control of her ability to narrate herself corporeally when we see her play herself as a cello. More radical, though, is the Mai's second Ovidian metamorphosis which goes beyond operating within legitimate cultural forms to embrace her abject status and exclusion to 'those "unliveable" and "uninhabitable" zones' (*Bodies* 3).

Agency is located in the negotiation between freedom and constraint and this conflict is staged at the end of the play, when the Mai's final lines are juxtaposed with the energy and transformative power of her second metamorphosis. Whether this conflict is used to enable the abject body to expose the limits of signification depends on the staging of the play. Her final words appear to signal a hopeless resignation in the face of a life without Robert:

THE MAI: People think I've no pride, no dignity, to stay in a situation like this,
but I can't think of one reason for going on without him.
MILLIE: Mom, you've never tried.
THE MAI: I don't want to. (Carr 185-6)

However, this is in conflict with her body's movement away from the window, where she has stood waiting for Robert. She moves towards a place outside the stage space; a realm evoked by sounds and music, beyond the discursive order where bodies 'matter' and are made accessible through language. The 1994 Peacock production of *The Mai* was scored through much of the play by cello music composed by Michael O'Suilleabhain which drew attention to the Mai's creative silence, as she no longer plays the cello, while Robert does. However, the production used cello music, instead of the 'sounds of water' suggested in the stage directions, to intimate the Mai's final dissolution into the lake, and therefore suggest her regained control of her subjectivity and creativity. The 1995 Abbey touring production of *The Mai* emphasized the Mai's agency even more clearly as her ghostly figure walked offstage then across the window where she pauses to defiantly look back. The Mai's movement is underlined; she is no longer trapped behind the window looking out but is now able to look back in, and her potential status as a victim is challenged by her defiant stance. In contrast to the 1994 Peacock production's ending, which frustrates closure, the McCarter Theater's 1996 production reasserts a narrative of tragic destiny and dependency on Robert, as the play closes with him holding the Mai's body. This reiterates the end of act one, rather

than offering movement, change and metamorphosis. A review of the production comments on the composer Bakida Carroll's 'haunting sound effect to echo Millie's tale of the cry a swan releases when lamenting its fallen mate,' and the reviewer goes on to describe how this serves to 'underscore the ghostly image of Robert carrying the drowned body of Mai which ends each act' (Callaghan 373). The McCarter production's use of a haunting sound throughout, to evoke the keening swansong referred to in Millie's narration, further highlighting the Mai's tragic destiny and dependence on Robert.

The Mai's suicide is problematic with regard to her agency, as there is a theatrical tradition of female characters for whom transgression results in suicide and punishment by death. My positive reading of The Mai's suicide engages with death as an enabling process through creative metamorphosis, rather than a punitive inevitability. Carr's play *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006) explores the process of dying as a reflection of the way you have lived. If we apply this to the Mai's death we see agency in the act of her creative and imaginative metamorphosis, the suggestion that she has the potential to live her life 'huge and heroic' (Carr 163), but an alternative heroism of female mythmaking. As Melissa Sihra notes, '[d]eath on stage does not indicate finality, but movement; it is a poetic drive to excavate what it means to live' ('New Stages' 112). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* suggests that the spirit is rehoused in different bodies and the Mai's metamorphosis rehouses her spirit in the lake. The lake becomes a space of expression, an alternative version of home, where she can reshape inherited myths and corporeally gendered roles. Sihra describes this idea of woman changing herself and therefore the space around her: 'Carr's play shows the process of woman "rehousing" herself through the act of creation and storytelling' ('House of Woman' 207).

By the end of the play the Mai's metamorphosed body has outgrown the theatrical forms which contained her; new forms are needed to accommodate her transforming identities and the transformed space she inhabits. The Mai rewrites the mythic signification of woman as land to reshape the landscape, physical and theatrical, and suggest an alternative creative space for woman which opens up and enables the exploration of identity. Articulation of the abject offers the potential to disrupt cultural norms and expose the fact that it is not unliveable bodies that need to conform, but the world around them which needs to change to house these bodies. The Mai's body cites the objectification of woman as cello, pietà, and geographical entity to transgress social norms and through her suicide she corporeally suggests alternatives. The ending of the play leaves open the possibility for the body to shape a new language which can accommodate the Mai, as Carr offers alternative significations which could rehouse a female symbolic. However, this potential to engage with possible narratives of the future, counter to the notion that Carr's heroines have merely given up and submitted to their tragic destiny, can only be realized through the staging of the play.

I will conclude by focusing on the question of whether the Mai can produce a 'radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all' (*Bodies* 23) through her metamorphoses and therefore reveal other possible liveable bodies. Butler suggests that cultural norms should be dismantled from within, but the Mai ultimately removes herself from the realms of signification. There is no suggestion that she has any future political agency; rather, agency is located in the process of metamorphosis and the possibilities of resignification, in the dislocations of the dominant order rather than an end result. Butler addresses the need to engage with the systems that

perpetuate cultural norms, 'to invoke the category, and hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest' (*Bodies* 221-2). The performativity of myth holds the creative potential for Butler's 'permanent political contest' through reperformance and resignification of identities, and the metamorphic process embodies the struggle for articulation of the abject. The abject exposes the tension between the corporeal and the limits of signification to question the inherited roles which constitute liveable lives and evoke other possibilities. The Mai's metamorphoses suggest an alternative, fluid world which promotes exploration of woman as process and allows the corporeal to invigorate the language of female mythmaking. Ultimately, it is through the staging of metamorphosis and of the possibilities for the articulation of the abject that the means of controlling, exploring, and exceeding the body within a patriarchal world are offered to the Mai.

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