The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies 22 (2015): 59-68. DOI: 10.17561/grove.v0i22.2697

MYTHS IN CRISIS? MARINA CARR'S REVISION OF FEMALE MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH THEATRE

María del Mar González Chacón

University of Oviedo (Spain)

Abstract

The theatre of Marina Carr evokes Sophocles' Electra in *The Mai* (1994), through female characters that pursue a mythical ending. It turns to classical modernity in *Marble* (2009), when women are unable to coexist with normative models, Trojan territories turn into unknown dreamlands, lasting and immaculate existences, that go beyond earthly life, are pursued, and the protagonists echo Greek heroines. Through a revision of the mythological content of her plays, the question of the crisis or persistence of myths in contemporary Irish society and culture can be addressed successfully: Irish and Greek female myths survive in the plays of Carr, and this technique highlights the relevance of mythology in today's Irish theatre as a strategy to question the role of women in society. On the other hand, this use of myth continues revealing the inability of modern materialist society to substitute the epic life of the individual.

Keywords: Myth, theatre, Marina Carr, Greek, Irish, female.

Resumen

El teatro de Marina Carr evoca la Electra de Sófocles en *The Mai* (1994), a través de personajes que anhelan un final mitológico. Se convierte en una modernidad clásica en *Marble* (2009) cuando las mujeres son incapaces de coexistir con modelos normativos, los paisajes troyanos se vuelven territorios-sueño desconocidos, se persiguen vidas duraderas e inmaculadas más allá de la existencia terrenal, y las protagonistas evocan heroínas griegas. A través de una revisión del contenido mitológico de sus obras, la cuestión de la crisis o persistencia de los mitos en la sociedad y cultura irlandesas contemporáneas se puede abordar con éxito: los mitos femeninos griegos e irlandeses sobreviven en las obras de Carr y esta técnica pone de manifiesto la importancia de la mitología en el teatro irlandés actual como una estrategia para cuestionar el papel de la mujer en la sociedad. Por otro lado, este uso de la mitología continúa revelando la imposibilidad de sustituir la sociedad moderna materialista por la vida épica del individuo.

Palabras clave: Mito, teatro, Marina Carr, griego, irlandés, femenino.

Greek mythology and Irish writers

Greek mythology has been in the hands of Irish writers for a long time with different intentions. The *filí* or Irish bards were influenced from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries by classical texts from Greece and Rome. This loyalty towards the Greeks was not stopped after the English plantation system had interfered with Irish culture and society in 1600, and the intrusion was answered back by means of the use of classical references to add a meaning of authority to Irish texts: the act of revisiting and appropriating Greek literature was considered as an act of rebellion against outside rule (Kiberd vii-xiii). In this sense, the universal underground consciousness revealed in myths was appropriated not only as a way to generalize and find common meanings but, also, as a strategy to individualize Irish contexts and tales and build Irish tragic landscapes reflecting the history of social upheaval and troubles.

Irish Greek tragedy continued being used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by playwrights to respond to an intention which was to "feed their own subversive protests" (McDonald 37). It implied social critique and became a literature of protest, "an act of making visible the invisible, of speaking the unspeakable" (38). W. B. Yeats, for whom the Greek drama had achieved perfection (Yeats 194), wrote tragedies during the Irish Literary Revival to dignify Ireland "by staging tragic drama that would exploit both contemporary settings and ancient Celtic myth" (Arkins 18). His *Deirdre* (1906) has a tragic death that echoes Helen's, as does the Deirdre of Synge in *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910). After this, O'Casey wrote *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), about the rebels of the Easter Rising. All these plays represented the uncertainty that defined the Irish society of the twentieth century, and prove how Greek tragedy suited the needs of the nation of the time as it allowed "for the exploration of issues of nationalism, of gender, of resistance" (22). In the late-twentieth century myths retain their malleability and are used as a distancing strategy to deal with dangerous issues in Ireland: Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984) echoes *Antigone* but is about Northern Ireland.

Most recently, classical myths in Irish literature are adapted to suit the needs of the contemporary society and myths have become "personal by virtue of its universality, inviting decodings tied to each new occasion or circumstance" (Walton *Hit or Myth*, 4). New social circumstances determine and influence the different revisions, and the most recent academic approaches to this issue establish translation, version or adaptations as the methods deployed in the approximations to Greek tragedy (Arkins 2010). Marina Carr's plays owe a lot to Greek plays. Both *The Mai* (1994) and *Marble* (2009) show the writer's mode and evolution. Carr's assemblage of myth and modernity constitutes a continuation of the Irish tradition of using the Greeks as firebrand. Scholars have identified Carr's process of mythmaking as a heritage that the playwright faces for the first time in *The Mai* and, while some critical studies have approached the tragedy that is present in Carr's plays from feminist points of view (Wallace), others have labelled Carr's plays as "wounded by myth" (Hancok 24). Also, Carr's use of Greek tragedy has been approached in more positive terms and her

rewriting has been said to go "hand-in-hand with her portrayal of a new woman who emerges out of self-destruction and violence" (Dedebas 248-249).

Marina Carr's appropriation is not the case of a straight translation, as it would be Desmond Egan's *Medea* (1991) or *Philoctetes* (1991). She is closer to other Irish dramatists who keep the core of the Athenian tragedy but write their own version, such as Brendan Kennelly's feminist *Medea* (1991) or even Enda Walsh's recent savage version of *Penelope* (2010). Her plays can also be said to be adaptations due to the fact that the setting is the modern world but the Greek plot is not lost. Moreover, her theatre contains the special interest in the works of Sophocles, related to the topic of recognition and an emphasis, on the other hand, on the figure of female characters such as Medea or Antigone, as Brendan Kennelly's version of 1985. This continuous reshaping of Greek classic drama interrogates the present and constitutes "a re-invigoration of tradition, a cross-cultural absorption and adaptation of form, content and context" (Jordan xvii) which in the case of Marina Carr results in a "passionate expression of [*female*] fears and hopes" (McDonald, *Classics* 17) which reflects the interest in the position of Irish women in society especially after independence. Powerful female characters represented in her plays illuminate the issues of family, power and morality for women and scholarship argues that Carr is the first Irish playwright "who has consistently represented women from the perspective of a woman" (Sihra 132).

The Mai and Greek myths

The Mai, first produced in October 1994 at the Peacok Theatre in Dublin, is considered as a rewriting of Sophocles' *Electra* (McDonald 2002) and also as retelling the story of Odysseus' return and his relationship with Penelope (Dedebas 2013). Being Carr's fifth play, it brought reviews in the Irish newspapers that accounted for the presence of myths. On the one hand, the atmosphere evoked by the play was outlined as "compounded of myth and memory, of fierce longing and bitter elegy" (O'Toole 1994), and the story itself was said to acquire "dimensions of myth and archetype" (ibid.). On the other side, the main actress of this first performance was attributed classical modes: Olwen Fouéré, as the Mai, was described as "a drifting sylph who seems to dance through her own anguish like a Celt Madonna and is capable to articulating deepseated woes and resentments" (Coveney 1994). Carr herself stated in the *New York Times* her decision to turn to Greek tragedy in this play as she was after "The Greek idea of destiny and fate and little escape" (Carr, cited in Clarity 1994).

The Mai's name evokes the Greek Goddess Maia, one of the seven daughters of Atlas. References to her can be found in *The Homeric Hymns*, specifically in the 'Homeric Hymn to Hermes', where she is identified with a nymph and thus attached to water, and also related to darkness and isolation through her depiction as living in a cave apart from the rest of gods and goddesses. Nothing is explained about the reasons that would have caused such a

state. She is also mentioned in the *Odyssey*, but only very briefly, as Hermes' mother and related to a liminal existence when she appears together with her six sisters, The Pleiades, and they are pursued by Orion and turned into stars by Zeus in an attempt to rescue them (Gantz 1993). She has later been identified as "a nurse of Herakles" (Larson 1995, 123) and as an abandoned mother who could not fulfil her nurturing duties due to her son's anxiety for fame. Robert Graves recalls how "When Hermes was born on Mount Cyllene his mother Maia laid him in swaddling bands on a winnowing fan, but he grew with astonishing quickness into a little boy, and as soon as her back was turned, slipped off and went looking for adventure" (Graves 1981, 21). All these references anticipate the character of The Mai as isolated, surrounded by women, caring in her duties as mother or sister and abandoned by her kin.

Marina Carr's play tells the story of four generations of Irish women. The action takes place over two years, (first act in 1979 and act two in 1980), in the Irish Midlands. The Mai has just been reunited with her husband Robert after several years of separation due to his anxiety for fame. While he was away, The Mai set about to build a perfect house for her family, in the hopes that someday they will all live there happily. In this home she receives the visit of her grandmother, aunts and sisters and lives together with her sons and daughters. Their lives constitute an act of eternal repetition in so far as all of them are unable to change their destinies. In this sense, the grandmother's statement that "We repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same" (Carr *Plays I*, 123), echoes Women's speeches in *Electra*, which also suggest the weight of the past when they announce that 'The curse is a living thing' (Walton *Sophocles Plays*, 163). Carr retains the Sophoclean theme of the mayhem and adapts it to the story of The Mai to recreate her own version of the myth.

Other Sophoclean motifs present in the Irish play include Electra's anxiety for fame and recognition which takes in Carr's version the form of unattainable dreams. These will act as oracles or mediums through which prophecies become true. We learn cathartically at the end of act one about the death of The Mai, which will allow for the play to acquire epic tragic dimensions transcending the locality of the county of Connemara. Robert's dream of The Mai's tragic ending acts as a prediction of the impending catastrophe: "I dreamt that you were dead and my cello case was your coffin and a carriage drawn by two black swans takes you away from me" (Carr *Plays I*, 125).

In Act two The Mai wants her life to be "huge and heroic and pure as in the days of yore" (Carr *Plays I*, 163). However, her destiny is bound to be an eternal waiting that echoes Electra's longing for Orestes and also Penelope's for Dionysius. The same day that Robert abandons her for the first time, she, symbolically, asks her daughter to buy a needle and thread. Grandma Fraochlan also spent most of her life "at the window pinin' for the nine-fingered fisherman" (141), her husband, to come back. Irish households have been, and are, palaces and places of pain for women. The Mai's house, first defined as a mansion, ends up being "dark and formless" (158), and the inside continues being the space

reserved for women as it was for Electra, who was continuously reminded that "indoors is the place for women" (Walton *Sophocles Plays*, 328).

This inside suffering causes heroic female resistance in the Irish play, and intra-familial bloodshed together with acts of revenge, are evoked to respond to the playwright's strategy to adapt the Greek idea of chaos to a modern Ireland, where dysfunctional families have not disappeared from society and where political troubles still echo on people's minds. Ellen, The Mai's mother, died "worn out from all them miscarriages and pregnancies" (Carr *Plays I*, 139) and The Mai notices "the fascination families have in the devastation of their nearest and dearest" (158). There are acts of treachery amongst the women of the play who share familial bonds: Ellen was betrayed by her own family who forced her to marry a man she did not love because "what else could she do, it was nineteen thirty-eight" (117), and she could not have an abortion. The institution of the family does not constitute a refuge for women but a constraint that implies the obligation to become a mother even though this would involve the sacrifice of having to renounce to other expectations. Insane cruelty in this context is shown by Grandma F., who shares Clytemnestra's coldness. Carr's character never had time for her children and became a madwoman when her husband abandoned her. The accusations from her own daughters for having chosen the men they married according to their bank accounts, following her advice, is vindictively answered back by Grandma in these terms: "I would gladly have hurled all seven of ye down the slopes of hell for one night more with the nine-fingered fisherman and may I rot eternally for such unmotherly feelin" (182).

By endowing female characters with these tragic traits that resemble Sophocles' play, Marina Carr is, on the one hand, using Greek myths to deconstruct the myth of women in Ireland, (Mother Ireland), as mothers who nurture and take care of their children. The other definable quality of Irish mothers as sacrificial is also questioned: The Mai, who has forfeited her life for the sake of her children, fed them, clothed them and educated them, while Robert was away doing the things she would like to have done, will end up acknowledging the futility and unending misery of her motherly existence. Moreover, the fact that the May chooses to enter the world of myth, when she drowns herself in Lake Owl in order to escape earthly existence, resembling Homeric nymph Maia, implies that the stories of the women of the play symbolise the persistence of tragic destiny for women in Ireland through history.

The Irish myth of Mother Ireland and Greek mythology

A brief revision of the importance of Irish female mythological characters allows to address the concept of Mother Ireland and to establish connections between Irish and Greek mythology that help understand Marina Carr's theatre and the strength of women in her plays. In *The Book of Invasions*, which tells the story of pre-Christian Ireland before the Celts arrived, goddesses were sacredly married to men who would become kings in the ceremony known as the 'marriage of sovereignity'. This "myth of royal initiation" (Kearney 8) was

necessary for the king to possess his land but also for the queen as, otherwise, she would become decrepit and unfruitful. It marked the role of women as wives but also as mothers, since the ritual married the queen to a man, but also to a land and its inhabitants. A first example of these powerful female myths was Medhbh "of [whom] it was said: 'Great indeed was the power and influence of that Medhbh over the men of Ireland, for she it was who would not permit a king in Tara unless he had her for his wife'" (ibid.). Gaelic literature and Celtic mythology compiled in the Ulster, Fenian, Mythological and Historical or King Cycles, contributed with female heroines such as Deirdre or Graine. Both of them belong to the elopement tales where women decided to run away and encouraged an illicit flight and union with a lover. These iconic figures evolved into Medieval heroines or suffering women in aisling poems in the 18th century, where the poet dreams with a beautiful woman who announces the end of the English control over Ireland. Colonialism, on its part, brought the figure of Hibernia, a young and week woman in need of protection from the powerful Britania (Rosende Pérez 253), and nationalism those of Dark Rosaleen, Cathleen NíHoulihan and Mother Ireland (260). In addition, the myth of Mother Ireland has been articulated through Greek mythology by contemporary Irish writers who have used classical texts to rewrite the role of Irish women: Carr, as an author who "writes in Greek" (McGuinness 89), challenges this icon when she inserts classical myths into the Midlands and in modern Ireland: her female characters reject their role as mothers and see their homes as prisons, find familial bonds asphyxiating and die from longing. Hence, her theatre constitutes both an expression of a rewriting of classical Greek myths and a challenge for the long-lasting Irish myth of Mother Ireland. The identification of the women in her plays with Ireland as a victim works in this context but also the theme of the exile or abandonment of mother duties as a release for women.

Marble

The Mai was followed by *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998), which owe a debt to *Medea*. *On Raftery's Hill*, (2000) echoes the myth of Hera and Zeus, and *Ariel* (2002) is based on *The Oresteia*. Marina Carr follows the tradition of Irish writers and approaches aspects of Ireland through her conversation with the classics by exploring "the culpability of a society that both knows and refuses to know its own shadow side in relation to the suffering of women and children" (Randolf 50). Her use of prominent Greek female figures creates on stage mirrors or filters through which modern society can stand the vision of difficult issues: only in a character that resembles Electra or Medea could the Irish audience be able to listen to comments about motherhood that disrupt traditional conceptions. Recent studies on Carr's theatre add that her plays respond to an intention to stage "the importance of acknowledging the effect of the past on the present" (Murphy 400). Her literature becomes, once again, a literature of protest.

Marble was first performed at the Abbey Theatre on February 2009. It is not inspired by myth: it is about the status of myth in modern times since "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" (Ryan 26). Even though the play is set on contemporary Ireland, modernity is superficial as it only constitutes the scenario where Carr continues drawing on the past to articulate the present. Myths exist in the twenty-first century Ireland "where technology devalues biological life and blurs the borders between the animal, the human and the machine" (Leeney 517), and Carr remains loyal to the classic writers as she considers that "These warriors of the desk, these songstichers, these myth finders, while scaring you with their formidable gifts, do also bolster the heart, especially in this anti-heroic age where the all-consuming intellectual pursuit seems to be that of demystification" (Carr 1998, 191).

In a nameless modern city four characters, (Art, Ben, Catherine and Anne), see how the intrusion of a dream disrupts the foundations of their lifestyles. The set is "a single space for all the play reigned by De Chirico's painting 'Melancholy and Mystery of a Street' [...] the near absence of people" (Carr, *Marble* 8), evoking the effect of placing modern characters in classical landscapes and Carr, once more, "circles back to questions of desire and longing" (Randolph 49). In this context, Art tells Ben about a dream he had: he is in a marble room having sex with Catherine who happens to be Ben's wife. The importance of carrying out an epic life is blatantly put into words by the women of the play: Catherine is excited to hear about Art´s dream and she considers that "there is always regret for the life you didn't lead" (Carr *Marble* 17) and "the life not lived is what kills" (ibid.). The perception of modern life as pointless is denounced by Anne, the other major female character, for whom life is "Just waiting for it all to end" (26). The marble room, in the marble dream, symbolises the spectacular and echoes the classical grandiose lives and deeds while modern society is considered as an age that will be remembered as "an era when men's and women's hearts were frozen" (42) and humans as made of "steel and concrete, decimals and fractions, the square root of nothing" (27). The life in this material world is defined as a prose of living governed by senseless rules and characters would like to inhabit classical landscapes instead: "a real marble room, classical proportions, pillars, columns, statues that are not copies" (33), to such an extent that there comes a moment in the play when the world of dreams, of the irrational, is over the real world. Female characters, Catherine, will eventually choose to inhabit that landscape rather than the *wakin* world since the impossible or unattainable, the world of thoughts, is more beautiful and thus she will "find the daylight strange, distorted, shadowy" (25) and will become a ghostly character who is constantly given disdainful looks by those who surround her.

Women in the play echo tragic heroines: they are aware of the need of sacrifices in order to attain an unearthly existence and Catherine tries to convince Art to fulfil their dream despite the bloodshed that this would imply: "I know the price that will be extracted in blood. Your blood. Mine" (Carr *Marble*, 45).

Moreover, she is a prophetic character, longs for a new Troy and hopes that life can start again from scratch: "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" (59). Representing a middle-aged Irish woman in the Ireland of the twenty-first century, for whom any sense of self has been lost, she does not want to rear her children anymore and constantly retreats into her dream represented by the marble, which provides the symbolic frame that justifies her destructive actions towards her kin. When Catherine chooses to live out her own life, she abandons her children without remorse and puts into words statements that echo classical anxiety for recognition outside the realm of the domestic: "I am so sick of being told I have a good life. That I have a good man, that my children are beautiful. […] I want more" (42). She does not kill her children, but abandons them knowing that the effect on them will be atrocious and, therefore, reproducing Medea's behaviour. She refuses the grey nightmare which would imply to continue behaving as the rest of the lot and chooses marble while her husband, significantly, accuses her of being courting tragedy. Her choice metaphors the survival of myths; the social rejection she suffers, she is seen as a monster, and the fact that she cannot finally live her dream, suggest that female deviant behaviours continue being unaccepted but also that new Irish women try to emerge out of self-destruction.

Myths are not in crisis in the plays of Marina Carr and her contribution to the process of transfer that occurs as myths travel in time consists in recreating female mythological characters that are versions of Greek figures adapted to Irish contexts: her women are monsters but passionate, irrational but empowered, discarded but resistant. Moreover, myths in the hands of this author unmask previous myths such as the Myth of Mother Ireland: neither The Mai or Catherine are suffering mothers anymore, but women who consciously hurt those who surround them in order to achieve their own expectations. The rewriting of Electra in *The Mai* and the classical modernity in *Marble* are reiterations of the power of myths that are revealed one more time in Irish theatre, myths whose flexibility serves this time the purpose of filtering Irish female painful realitites.

WORKS CITED

Arkins, Brian. *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010.

Carr, Marina. "Dealing with the dead." *Irish University Review* 28:1, (1998): 190-6.

---. *Plays 1. Low in the Dark, The Mai, Portia Coughlan, By the Bog of Cats....* London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

---. *Marble*. Loughcrew: TheGalleryPress, 2009.

Clarity, James F. "A Playwright's post-Beckett period." *New York Times*, November 1994.

Coveney, Michael. "Theatre finest slices of Irish life." *The Observer*, October 9, 1994.

Dedebas, Eda. "Rewriting of Tragedy and Women's Agency in Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats..., Ariel* and *Woman and Scarecrow*." *Women's Studies* 42:3, (2013): 248-70.

Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Graves, Robert. *Greek Myths*. London: Cassell Publishers, 1981.

Hancok, Brecken Rose. "'That House of Proud Women!': Diseased Legacy and Mythmaking in Marina Carr's *The Mai*." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 31:2 (2005): 19-26.

Jordan, Eamonn. "Introduction." *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Ed. Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000. xi-xlviii.

Kearney, Richard. "Women in Irish Mythology." *The Crane Bag* 4.1 (1980): 7-11.

Kiberd, Declan. "Introduction." *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. Eds. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton.London: Methuen, 2002. vii-xiii.

Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Heroine Cults*. London: The University of Winconsin Press, 1995.

Leeney, Cathy. "Marina Carr: Violence and Destruction: Language, Space and Landscape." *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*. Ed.Mary Luckhurst. West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010. 509-518.

McDonald, Marianne. "Classics as Celtic Firebrand: Greek Tragedy, Irish Playwrights and Colonialism." *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Ed. Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000. 16-26.

---. "The Irish and Greek Tragedy." *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. Eds. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton. London: Methuen, 2002. 37-80.

McGuinness, Frank. "Writing in Greek: *By the Bog of Cats….*" *The Theatre of Marina Carr "before rules was made."* Eds. Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003. 87-89.

Murphy, Paula. "Staging Histories in Marina Carr's Midlands Plays" *Irish University Review* 36:2 (2006): 389-402.

O'Toole, Fintan. "A new world on show." *The Irish Times*, October 25, 1994.

Randolf, Jody Allen. "The Shadow Side of Modern Ireland: Marina Carr's Midlands Tragedies" *World Literature Today* July-August, (2012): 47-50.

Rosende Pérez, Aida. "La iconografía femenina de Irlanda. Creación y re/construcción de una nación en femenino." *Lectora* 14 (2008): 251-267.

Ryan, Owen Thomas. "The Bardic Imperative in the Drama of Marina Carr and Connor McPherson." PhD diss. Dublin Business School of Arts, 2010.

Sihra, Melissa. "Greek Myth, Irish Reality: Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats….*" *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today*. Eds. John Dillon and S.E. Wilmer. London: Methuen Publishing, 2005. 115-135.

Wallace, Claire. "Tragic Destiny and Abjection in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats…*" *Irish University Review. A Journal of Irish Studies* 31. 2 (2001): 431-450.

Walton, Michael J. *Sophocles Plays II*. Translated by Kenneth McLeish. London: Methuen, 1990.

---. "Hit or Myth: the Greeks and Irish Drama." *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. Eds. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton. London: Methuen, 2002. 3-37.

Yeats, William Butler. *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964 (1940).

Received: 17 July 2015

Accepted: 6 November 2015