

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 30

March 2015

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*“Your children are haunted. And you don't give a fuckin' damn!”*¹

This article analyses the use of classical sources in Marina Carr's Midland Trilogy, including *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlain* and *By the Bog of Cats*. 1994 saw the beginning of a new phase in Carr's writing with the performance of *The Mai*, marking a change from the absurdism of her earlier plays. Since this change of direction, many of Carr's plays have been based on ancient Greek materials, taking inspiration from both the Homeric myths as well as the tragedies. While *The Mai* roughly replays the story of Odysseus' homecoming to Penelope, albeit with a widely different ending, *Portia Coughlain* is partially based on *The Oresteia*, and *By the Bog of Cats* adapts Euripides' *Medea*. Although Carr receives many elements of ancient Greek mythology and culture, her plays show their Irish origin through the characters' accents and depictions of typically Irish landscapes. This paper outlines how those landscapes take on a double function as they begin to demarcate transgressive spaces, filled with visible and invisible ghosts, who transcend the boundary between present and past and between myth and realism.

This article aims for a thorough comprehension of Carr's classical reception through an exploration of the relationship between classical ghosts and the Irish landscape in Marina Carr's plays. It will demonstrate how Carr places a modern version of the classical

¹ Marina Carr, *Marina Carr: Plays 1*, 156.

underworld and some of its inhabiting spectres within the Irish landscape in order to draw attention to a time which repeats in circles, in which the ghosts of the past remind the living of their continuing influence in the manner of Derrida's spectres. This influence, however, is depicted as negative, causing murder and driving the protagonists of Carr's plays into suicide, whereby Carr showcases how by not acknowledging the haunting spectres one's past one is bound to repeat it cyclically.

The importance of ghosts in plays receiving the classics is perhaps less surprising in Marina Carr than this seeming disparity of themes might imply. Carr has been perpetually fascinated with spiritual haunting and emphasises a need to increase the presence of ghosts in modern theatre.² Frank McGuinness writes: 'I wonder what Marina Carr believes? I think it might be the Greek gods – Zeus and Hera, Pallas Athena. She knows what the Greeks know. Death is a big country. And hers is a big imagination, crossing the border always between the living and the dead'.³ He thereby provides a useful introduction for Carr's conception of the relationship between classical sources and considerations of a haunting past, of ghosts.

Carr herself expands on this relationship more clearly when she rewrites the encounter between Odysseus and the ghosts he summons during his *Nekyia* as a metaphor about writing and writerly influences: 'I think this passage is Homer talking about writing and how to gain access to hidden knowledge, to the past, to the dead, to that other world'.⁴ She sees the use of influences from dead writers as having conversations with their ghosts, a 'dangerous' conversation which is necessary, however, to acquire the 'wisdom and circumspection needed when dealing with the dead or the past, with memory, knowledge - all necessary tools for the writer'.⁵ Carr's use of the classics is thus intimately tied to the effects which ghostly

² Rhona Trench, *Bloody Living: The Loss of Selfhood in the Plays of Marina Carr*, 129.

³ Frank McGuinness, 'Programme Note', 87.

⁴ Carr 'Dealing with the Dead', 190.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

influences and memory have on gestating the present. The best place to start for understanding Carr's use of ghosts in her plays' classical reception will be to unravel the links of ghostly presences to the Irish landscape and to particularly spaces of water, including Owl Lake in *The Mai*, the Belmont river in *Portia Coughlain*, and, finally, the stagnant pools of *By The Bog of Cats*.

The Mai's main story-line is intrinsically tied to water. It starts with the Mai's long wait for Robert's return during which she overlooks Owl Lake in front of her window and also indirectly the Atlantic, which Robert crossed upon leaving her. It later ends with the Mai drowning herself in the very lake she has been fixated on. Wallace has recognised that this play partially parallels the story of Odysseus and Penelope,⁶ as it follows Penelope's wait for her husband to return from over the sea, and later their reunion. The effects to which the *Odyssey* is referenced in *The Mai* will become clear particularly through the construction of water in Carr's play and its relation to the story's ghosts.

Owl Lake, the play's main source of water, functions as the play's central point of fixation: The Mai spends hours contemplating the lake, waiting for Robert to come home. Visually, the window of the Mai's dream house frames the entire drama,⁷ whereby the action of overlooking the lake is put into primary focus for both the play's characters and the audience. Throughout the play, water seems to take on a dream-like quality for the Mai, noticeable from the very start when she '*passes the window, turns to look out on Owl Lake, hears a cello note- decides she is dreaming*'.⁸ Later, this quality is repeated as both the Mai and Robert's dreams centre on a river, dreams in which water takes on metaphorical qualities

⁶ Clare Wallace, 'Tragic Destiny and Abjection in Marina Carr's 'The Mai, Portia Coughlan' and 'By the Bog of Cats...'", 438.

⁷ Ibid., 449.

⁸ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 107.

essential for understanding its role in the play. After Robert returns, the Mai narrates her dream for him:

I'm a child walking up a golden river and everything is bright and startling. At the bend in the river I see you coming towards me whistling through two leaves of grass—you're a child too – and as you come nearer I smile and wave, so happy to see you, and you pass me saying, 'Not yet, not yet, not for thousands and thousands of years.' And I turn to look after you and you're gone and the river is gone and away 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 you there.⁹

In her vision, the river functions as the supposed meeting-place for her and Robert, similar to Owl Lake in the play's reality. In both the modern play and its ancient source, the *Odyssey*, water is thereby constructed as the element which both prevents and enables reunion: The Atlantic Ocean separated the Mai and Robert, but Owl Lake reunites them. In her dream Robert claims, however, that the desired reunion will not occur for 'thousands and thousands of years'. As a reaction, the Mai decides to cross the river by herself for now and to enter a black cavern, knowing it to be a place where she is bound to meet Robert one day. The description of the cave as black and leading nowhere, together with the promise of an inevitable reunion reveal it to be a representation of the Greek underworld, Hades. Depictions of Hades in the *Odyssey*, for instance, parallel the Mai's dream-cavern in describing a dark land below the surface where all living beings will end up eventually,¹⁰ as do many other classical *catabaseis*,¹¹ including Plato's Myth of *Er* and Vergil's *Aeneid*.

⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 11.15-30.

¹¹ Raymond Clark, *Catabasis: Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition*, 34.

Leeney also recognises the cavern to represent the Underworld, however in her interpretation she conceptualises Robert and the Mai as Hades and Persephone.¹² The second part of this interpretation is contextually problematic, since according to the Greek myth, Hades abducted Persephone into the Underworld. Even neglecting the fact that Robert cannot physically follow the Mai into the Underworld, the original dynamic inherently defines Hades as the active party and Penelope as the passive victim. While one can make the case that the Mai is a victim of Robert's actions and that he is at least partially responsible for her suicide, in this particular scene, Robert is clearly outlined as a powerless party, evident in his own description of the dream:

Robert: 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 over a dark expanse of water and I ran after this strange hearse shouting, 'Mai, Mai,' and it seemed as if you could hear my voice on the moon, and I'm running, running, running over water, trees, mountains, through I've long lost sight of the carriage and of you.¹³

Robert describes the Mai as out of his reach, and himself as unable to save her from a carriage drawn by a mysterious force. This force represents the presence of an inevitable destiny in Carr's play, most likely inspired by the ancient Greek conception of μοῖρα. Firstly, Robert's powerlessness to resist its influence seems to imply this, as well as the presence of swans, a common form of Zeus who often functions as the arbiter of human destiny.¹⁴ Swans will throughout this article play an important role of indicating the influence of fate.

The river in front of the Underworld, featuring in both dreams, can in this context be no other than the Styx. The Styx is a river no living person can supposedly cross as its

¹² Cathy Leeney, 'The Return', *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, 235.

¹³ Marina Carr: *Plays 1*, 125.

¹⁴ Boys-Stones and Haubold, *Plato and Hesiod*, xiviii.

function is to separate the living from the dead. The fact that in her dream the Mai enters Hades before Robert can cross the river foreshadows her suicide at the end of the play; Robert's inability to follow her shows that he will outlive her. As Robert and the Mai's dreams both imply that the Mai's suicide is inevitable and even predestined, so do further indications of her premature death haunt both the play's script and visuals. For instance, when Grandma Fraochlán first sees the Mai in her fancy dress before she goes out with Robert, she calls her '(a)n apparition if ever I saw one'.¹⁵ Although she is referencing the Mai's beauty, 'apparition' is also commonly used in connection with ghosts.

However, *The Mai* does not only portray its main character as haunted by a fated death but implies that this is a curse spanning several generations, similar to the curse of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The curse is first described as affecting Grandma Fraochlán, who was, similar to the Mai, always 'at the window pinin' for the nine-fingered fisherman'.¹⁶ More importantly Julie later describes how '(s)everal nights I dragged her from the cliffs, goin' to throw herself in, howlin' she couldn't live without the nine-fingered fisherman'.¹⁷ Grandma Fraochlán herself insists that: "(w)hen my time comes I'm to be thrun into the wide Atlantic! D'ye all hear that? Twenty mile sou'west of Fraochlán where the nine-fingered fisherman's currach went down".¹⁸ The function of water as the place of reunion between the Grandmother and her fisherman is thus established and Grandma Fraochlán's attempts at suicide even hint at the presence of a death pact between her and her husband, similar to the one between Portia and Gabriel. With Grandma Fraochlán, the story of the Mai finds its predecessor in another woman waiting by a window, waiting for a lover to return and finally looking to suicide as their only chance of reunion.

¹⁵ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 166.

¹⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁸ Ibid., 180.

The presence of the nine-fingered fisherman haunts the play, however his prevailing associations with water furthermore imply that his ghost is still waiting for Grandma Fraochlán near the place he drowned. Furthermore, the stage directions of *The Mai* seem to construct water as an inherently haunted space, surrounded by ‘*Ghostly light on the window*’ and ‘*Ghostly effect*’.¹⁹ To understand why ghosts would haunt spaces of water and not simply enter the underworld, some ancient Greek context is needed. The assumption hereby is that the waters haunted by the presences of the dead function are representations of the Styx, the river outlining the entrance to the Underworld. The river's function in the Mai's and Robert's dream is thus transferred into reality and further expanded on.

The connection of water to spaces of death is found in the most frequent depiction of the classical Underworld, wherein the next world is found beyond a body of water; either an ocean, a bay, or most often a river which is crossed variously by ferry, bridge, or act of wading.²⁰ In Homer specifically, the souls of all those who have not received the correct funeral rites are not allowed to cross the Styx and can thus not enter the Underworld itself. For instance, in *Iliad* 23.71-73, Patroklos' ghost complains about not being able to cross the river, as his body has not been buried yet. The ancient critic Porphyrios ascribes powers of forgetting to this river, similar to the ones Plato later ascribes to Lethe. However, for him these powers constitute the reason a second category of souls is also not allowed to cross the river, namely those who still have a debt to pay or punishment to receive: Those souls have to be constantly faced with the reason for their punishment and are not allowed to receive the soothing effects of forgetting.²¹

The presence of the nine-fingered fisherman is felt as haunting throughout the play because his soul is still waiting at the river Styx. He is unable to enter Hades, reflecting how

¹⁹ Ibid., 147-8.

²⁰ Bruce Lincoln, “Waters of Memory, Waters of Forgetfulness.” *Fabula* , 49.

²¹ Georg Petzl, *Antike Diskussionen Über Die Beiden Nekyiai* , 10.

in ancient Greek culture, a death in water was often assumed to prevent a proper burial since many bodies were lost at sea.²² In Robert's premonition and Millie's narration, the Mai's presence similarly haunts her family, which shows how her soul was unable to move on either. Her suicide thereby arguably constitutes a transgression she is punished for, but both souls are predominantly unable to enter Hades because they are still waiting for their significant others to join them. The promise of their lovers to join them constitutes a debt and before it has been paid, they cannot move on.

Carr later attempts to tie these complex references to ancient Greek myth into a seemingly traditionally Irish context. For this, she invents an origin story for Owl Lake which she tells in a language resembling ancient Irish legends, calling it for instance *loch cailleach oíche*. It tells the story of Coillte, daughter of the mountain god, who fell in love with Bláth, Lord of all the flowers. Bláth, however, was under a dark witch's spell and thus had to go and live at her lair. Missing her lover, Coillte cried a lake of tears 'that stretched for miles around'. The witch then pushed Coillte into this very lake, in which she dissolved. In the present, both her ghost and the one of her lover still supposedly haunt the lake.²³

The fact that Carr invented the myth allows her to tailor it to suit her agenda of combining Greek myth with an Irish context. Although the myth's language and setting parallels real Irish mythology, it also includes many tropes from ancient Greek legends. According to Hennessey, for instance, the descent of one character into a lair or a cave which causes the despair of another parallels the story of Persephone and Demeter.²⁴ I agree with his identification of Greek elements such as Hades in the story but would argue that the references to spells and water more clearly reference the *Odyssey*. Firstly, the competition

²² Homer, 5.311; Lawson 427; Johnston, 488.

²³ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 147.

²⁴ Katherine Anne Hennessey, *Memorable Barbarities and National Myths: Ancient Greek Tragedy and Irish Epic in Modern Irish Theatre*, 161.

between the witch and Coillte, Bláth's original lover, recalls Circe's attempts to bewitch Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Furthermore, the fact that the despairing character is Bláth's lover and not mother links the reference to Penelope rather than Demeter, as well as the emphasis on water as the element which both separates and reunites the couple.

Therein, the legend provides more evidence for the proposition that ghostly presences are especially tangible near watery spaces because those spaces represent the river Styx, the entrance of the underworld. As Millie narrates how 'Sam Brady told me when the geese are restless or the swans suddenly take flight, it's because they hear Bláth's pipes among the reeds, still playing for Coillte',²⁵ she notes the remaining presences of the lovers' ghosts by the lake. As Coillte never received a proper funeral, having dissolved in the lake, her ghost is unable to move on into the Underworld and her lover most likely refuses to leave without her.

Millie's story does not only adapt elements of the *Odyssey*, however, but also serves as a re-narration of *The Mai's* main storyline. Water is the source of death for both Coillte and the Mai and while Coillte literally drowns in the result of her heartache as she created the lake from her own tears, sorrow is also the Mai's undoing, comprising the reason for her suicide. As the legend's outcome so closely parallels the Mai and Robert's story, it serves as another instance of the curse which repeats cyclically and ultimately affects all of Carr's female protagonists, legendary or not.

As Millie describes how particularly the geese and swans can sense the lovers' ghostly presences, her mention of swans once more points towards the influence of fate in this iteration of the curse. As noted in the context of Robert's dream, swans are a common form of Zeus, an ancient Greek god responsible for the fates of mortals. In the legend, the swans draw attention to the presence of a destiny which led Coillte to her death in the same way as the

²⁵ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 147.

Mai. Destiny can thus be identified as the force which compels the continuation of the curse.

Throughout *The Mai*, the swan is increasingly conceptualised as a symbol for an aggressive and enforcing destiny which cannot not be evaded:

Millie: I dream of water all the time. I floundering off the shore, or bursting towards the surface for air, or wrestling with a black swan trying to drag me under.²⁶

Through the direct influence of fate, the same story is bound to repeat itself over several generations, a curse which the women affected by it are powerless to change, not least because they are often even unaware of it.²⁷ Grandma Fraochlán emphasises that this curse could indeed last for thousands of years because she affirms that the characters cannot help but to reenact the same tale over and over again: ‘we can't help repeatin', Robert, we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same’.²⁸

Thus, when the Mai finally meets her death by water, the presence of swans is also noted, indicating that the Mai's fate has fulfilled itself: ‘*Millie watches The Mai looking out the window. A few seconds later, The Mai turns and drifts from the room. Sounds of geese and swans taking flight, sounds of water. Silence. Lights down*’.²⁹ As this is the last image the spectator sees in the play, the fact that Millie's last pose equals the Mai's initial one implies that Millie's fate is equally cursed as that of her mother and grandmother, something the Mai herself realises when she describes her children as cursed.³⁰ Repeating the same cycle, Millie is bound to look at Owl Lake or the ocean outside her window, waiting for a man, and finally committing suicide only to be locked outside Hades, haunting the spaces around the Styx. ‘And on a confident day when I am considering a first shaky step towards something

²⁶ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 184.

²⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁸ Ibid., 123.

²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³⁰ Ibid., 156.

within my grasp, the caul constricts and I am back at Owl Lake again'.³¹

While the women of *The Mai* longingly watch Owl Lake outside of their window, Portia in *Portia Coughlan* actually explores the outdoors herself, which grants the landscape an even greater presence in this play. *Portia Coughlan* features references to various classical sources, including the Homeric epics, in its mention of the Cyclops,³² and the similarity of Raphael's injury to Philoctetes'. Its main story-line, however, follows the Electra-myth in its constant invocations of familial ghosts at the place of their death, its focus on the relationship between brother and sister and its cyclical construction, although, similar to *The Mai*, the story progresses vastly differently from its model.

Similar to the Mai, Portia is fixated on the outdoors, which distances her from the other characters, who have little interest in the local folktales and natural cycles.³³ Her intimate connection with 'the forty green fields... the mouths of the starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows (that) bellow... from the barn in frosty winter night'³⁴ is counterbalanced by her dislike for the monological discourse of the house. Thereby Portia challenges the traditional position of women in the Republic of Ireland, which has officially been located within the home since De Valera's 1937 Constitution.³⁵

In the outdoors, it is particularly water which fascinates the female heroine, evidenced by Portia's obsession with the Belmont river in which her twin drowned. Portia recognises her own fixation, admitting that even if she went away, "my mind'd be turnin' on the Belmont River".³⁶ The appeal of the river seems to be connected to its mystical features, as it creates a

³¹ Ibid., 184.

³² Marina Carr: Plays 1, 204.

³³ Ibid., 218-19.

³⁴ Ibid., 213-14.

³⁵ Melissa Sihra, 'The House of Woman and the Plays of Marina Carr.' *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, 211.

³⁶ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 207-8.

fluidity between life and death, for instance in allowing Portia to see Gabriel's ghost.³⁷ This fluidity has mainly negative effects on Portia, however, since she describes how living by the river, her life is slowly overtaken by symptoms of death: she 'might as well be dead' with 'the house creakin' like a coffin' until '(s)ometimes I can't breathe anymore'.³⁸ Yet Portia feels compelled to stay near the river,³⁹ possibly led by the same enforcing destiny that drove the Mai into Owl Lake.

As the river allows Portia to see Gabriel, its waters are inherently haunted by his presence: it is rarely seen without Gabriel's ghost walking near it, a pattern established from the very beginning of the play.⁴⁰ In Gabriel's visual presentation, Carr adopts elements of the presentation of ghosts on the ancient Greek stage. As evidenced by Aeschylus' *Persians*, the place where a spirit appeared was usually near his or her grave, and as Darius arises near his tomb, so Gabriel only appears next to the Belmont river.⁴¹ Gabriel's direct model from ancient Greek tragedy is likely Clytemnestra, another of the few ghosts to ever appear on the Greek stage.

Gabriel is based on Clytemnestra both in terms of their presentation on stage, and, more importantly, their reasons for seeking out their family members. They both aim to drive their object of haunting into madness and eventually death as repayment for an injustice done to them. Clytemnestra remarks that as she has been slain by her son but not yet avenged, she is dishonoured among the rest of the dead whereby their reproach of her is never-ceasing.⁴² Gabriel faced a similar betrayal, as upon the supposed execution of their mutual death pact, Gabriel killed himself in the Belmont river, while Portia retreated at the last moment.

³⁷ Ibid., 193; 209; 232; 235; 247.

³⁸ Ibid., 207.

³⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 193; 209.

⁴¹ Ruby Mildred Hickman, "Ghostly Etiquette on the Classical Stage", 22.

⁴² Ibid., 100-102.

According to the mythology outlined earlier, neither Gabriel nor Clytemnestra can enter Hades until these debts have been repaid.

As Clytemnestra's death was foreshadowed by the cycle of revenge which has cursed Agamemnon's family for decades, the parallels between the two ghosts render it likely that Gabriel and Portia's story is equally haunted by an inevitable fate. Blaize notes that Portia was headin' to 'the murky clay of Belmont graveyard [...] from the day she was born because when you breed animals with humans you can only bring forth poor haunted monsters who've no sense of God or man. Portia and Gabriel. Changelin's'.⁴³ She recognises that both Gabriel and Portia's deaths were fated, Gabriel's especially so since his is also said to be predetermined by the incest in his family,⁴⁴ an incest conceptualised as distinctly Oedipal in the lack of knowledge of the parents.⁴⁵ This Greek sense of destiny is mixed with the Irish mythology of Changelings, however, whereby Carr once more includes her classical reception into Irish culture.

Another instance of this mix of Irish and Greek culture is notable in a legend Portia recounts which, similar to the one in *The Mai*, seems Irish in terms of its style and language, but was actually invented by Carr:

Fintan: wasn't it about some ault river God be the name of Bel and a mad hoor of a witch as was doin' all sorts of evil round here but they fuckin' put her in her place, by Jaysus they did.

Portia: She wasn't a mad hoor of a witch! And she wasn't evil! Just different, is all, and the people round here impaled her on a stake and left her to die. And Bel heard her cries and came down the Belmont Valley and taken her away from here and the

⁴³ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 229.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 245.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 244.

river was born. And they say Bel taken more than the girl when he swept through the valley. I don't know enough about that, but I think they do say right for this place must surely be the dungeon of the fallen world.⁴⁶

Like in *The Mai*, the river is once again born out of a female heroine's despair as the story centres on the supposed reunion of a couple. Portia draws a clear link between the river and Hades through calling the land around it 'the dungeon of the fallen world'. This implies that the Belmont River is likely a representation of Styx, as Owl lake was in *The Mai*, whereby in both legends spaces of water were created by a female heroine and, depending whether one believes Fintan or Portia's account, both where the locations of their deaths. This legend is thus yet another iteration of the same story which repeats itself in the landscape of the Midlands.

The presence of two different accounts of the river's origin also raises concerns about unreliable historiography, especially since the issue of how the past is remembered is already so present in the play. Although *The Mai* already engaged with ideas of rewriting of the past through the Mai's idealization of Robert, such fictiveness is more present in *Portia Coughlain*. In Act Three, for instance, Portia's account of her bond with Gabriel is undercut, as she and her mother present two different versions of their relationship. While Portia clings to the illusion of her and her brother's inseparability, it is revealed that she forsook him in their suicide agreement and that during a certain period before he died she even refused contact with Gabriel altogether.⁴⁷ In this context, Gabriel's silence can be read as expressing the impossibility resurrecting an accurate account of history.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 250.

As the presence of a fated curse in *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlain* has been noted to parallel the curse in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the third instalment of the trilogy is the most important one since it is in the *Eumenides* when Orestes breaks the cycle of revenge haunting his family. Although it will be shown to still engage with the curse, in terms of its immediate story *By the Bog of Cats* is based on *Medea*. As in Carr's previous plays, the transference of the classics into the Irish midlands is still by no means straightforward: The Greek messenger is converted into the Ghost fancier, while the blind seer Teiresias is turned into the figure of Catwoman. Even the Medea myth itself is reversed so a girl child is sacrificed instead of the traditional boys and the legend is further subverted when the motive for the killing is love, and not hatred or revenge. Despite all these changes, Carr manages to partially recreate the mood of Euripides: As Medea's barbarian magic creates a certain strangeness for its Greek audience,⁴⁸ this strangeness is recreated in Carr's midlands through its saturation with ghostly presences. As in the previous iterations of her Midland trilogy, this haunting will be shown as closely tied to the Irish landscape.

Similar to Carr's previous heroines, Hester is tied more to the outside than the inside, which reinforces her origin as a traveller. While she manages to leave the restrictive notions of domesticity, her extensive linkage to swans indicates that instead she is constricted by mythological fate. When Hester was just born, her mother left her in a swan's lair and decided that her daughter 'will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less',⁴⁹ tying Hester's life to that of the animal. That this tie is never separated becomes clear in the final line of *By the Bog of Cats* in which Monica notes that Hester 'cut her heart out – it's lyin' there on top of her chest like some dark feathered bird',⁵⁰ whereby the separation of woman

⁴⁸ Valerie Reed, *Mournful Welcome: Strangeness, Tragic Lamentation, and the Poetics of Modern Hospitality*, 90.

⁴⁹ Marina Carr: *Plays 1*, 275.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

and animal is completely dissolved. Kader notes how in Irish literature people are oftentimes associated with birds, as they are figured as symbols of exile. Wild geese function as the mythological Children of Lir, who, after being turned into swans, must remain on the waves and not touch land for nine hundred years. Stephen Dedalus's encounter with the 'bird girl' also ties into this, as she inspires him to become an artist and therefore to go into exile himself.⁵¹ Carr's swan, like Hester, has become a permanent fixture on the bog, which implies that Hester's home is at the same time her exile from society.

As her connection to the swan permanently exiles Hester to the outside, she is the most susceptible to influences of the landscape out of all the protagonists of Carr's Midland Trilogy. The Bog of Cats is an inherently watery space, as a bog constitutes 'a piece of wet spongy ground',⁵² 'frequently surrounding a body of open water'.⁵³ While Joseph and his father will be shown as mainly tied to Bergit's lake, Hester seems spiritually tied to this bog, as when Carthage asks Josie where her mother is and she replies: "Isn't she always on the bog?"⁵⁴ Hester even frequents the bog at night,⁵⁵ which gives her a ghostly appearance, walking around during the hours when spirits traditionally come out to haunt the living.

She describes herself as unable to leave the bog at all, recalling Portia and the Mai.⁵⁶ Her constant reiterations of her inability to leave the bog thereby allow the bog to define Hester's sense of self.⁵⁷ More than indicating Hester's psychological reliance on the landscape, they also emphasise the place's supernatural activity, which defines her as a passive party unable to break the enchainment:

⁵¹ Emily L. Kader. "The Anti-Exile in Marina Carr's 'By the Bog of Cats...'" *Nordic Irish Studies* 4, 169.

⁵² "bog." oed.com. Oxford English Dictionary, 2013, Web 8 January 2015.

⁵³ "bog." Merriam-Webster.com Merriam-Webster, 2015, Web 8 January 2015.

⁵⁴ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 282.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 290,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 315.

⁵⁷ Kader, 168.

Hester: 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 ye'es, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held ye'es.⁵⁸

Hester's psychological ties to the Bog are thereby combined with its magical properties, making it the perfect trapping ground for her personal ghosts. Unsurprisingly, the bog's magical properties then seem to manifest through its quality of allowing for the return of the dead, enabling the return of Joseph and, according to Hester, that of her mother.⁵⁹

That the play begins with the appearance of the Ghost Fancier already implies that Carr's bog is filled with more ghosts than the landscapes in both other Midland Tragedies. Martinovich, however, sees the haunting memory of Big Josie Swane as the most important ghost in the play. She argues that her presence plagues Hester until her own death, always as a shadow figure, illusory and unreal.⁶⁰ Towards the end of the play Hester realises that the only possible place of reunion for her and her mother is death,⁶¹ as it had been the only possible meeting-place for the Mai and Robert, and Portia and Gabriel.

As in the previous tragedies, Carr uses ghostly images to suggest the complicated interweaving of the living and the dead, the past and the present. Once more, it is implied that the female protagonist will continue to haunt the bog after her death, as Hester for instance states that "for a long time now I been thinkin' I'm already a ghost".⁶² However, it is also implied that Josie, Hester's daughter, will haunt the bog with her, turning all three generations

⁵⁸ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 289.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 297.

⁶⁰ M. K. Martinovich, "The Mythical and the Macabre: The Study of Greeks and Ghosts in the Shaping of the American Première of *By the Bog of Cats*..." *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "Before Rules Was Made."*, 120.

⁶¹ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 324.

⁶² Ibid., 321

of the Swane family into ghostly presences. Hester threatens Carthage that Josie and she will be 'ghostin' him after their deaths⁶³ and Josie already sings towards the very beginning of the play that:

To the Bog of Cats I one day will return,
 In mortal form or in ghostly form,
 And I will find you there and there with you sojourn,
 Forever by the Bog of Cats, my darling one.⁶⁴

In these indications and descriptions, it is not the ghosts' presentation itself which causes feelings of uneasiness and fright but the threat of their numbers, due to the inevitability of the generational curse. Carr's individual ghosts, even if they are visible, are not described as threatening in and of themselves. They have no physical powers, and some of them, like Joseph, even normally converse with the living. What is frightening about them is the implication of their rising quantity, as the plays suggest that all female protagonists will join the ranks of ghosts after their deaths. This characteristic of Carr's ghosts is most likely inspired by the effect Greek *eidola* had on characters they encountered, such as Odysseus or Orestes. The dead in Homeric epic, for instance, the *hoi polloi*, are characterised through their superfluity in numbers, which creates notions of powerlessness, frailty and transience in the living.⁶⁵ It is the plentitude of ghosts, then, not the individual spirits, which creates the sense of uncanniness and fright in the *Odyssey*.⁶⁶

Similar to *The Mai* and *Portia*, The ghosts in *By the Bog of Cats* are once again tied to water. As Hester and Josie will continue to haunt the bog, Joseph Swane wishes to be alive

⁶³ Ibid., 340

⁶⁴ Ibid., 270

⁶⁵ Rutter and Sparkes, *Word and Image in Ancient Greece*, 148.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 149.

again to 'fish for wild salmon and sow pike on Bergit's Lake again'.⁶⁷ The fact that even in wishing for the impossible, i.e. his own resurrection, his imagination is still bound to the waters of the Bog of Cats, shows their power over both the living and the dead. As he died in water,⁶⁸ his ghost will stay tied to water, both unwilling and unable to leave the area around Bergit's Lake.

As in the previous adaptations, the connection between water and ghosts is likely taken from ancient Greek myth, as when a body fell into water its ghost was bound to come back to haunt the living, begging to receive a proper burial. Joseph's ghost in particular recalls Polydorus from *Hecuba*, as no solemn evocation nor vengeful hatred motivate his return, but only the wish for his mother to become aware of his fate and his own desire to find peace among the dead. As long as Joseph and Polydorus' bodies lie unburied on the shore or are tossed into water, their spirits are doomed to restless wandering.⁶⁹

A feature of water which is present in *By the Bog of Cats* but not in the previous Midland tragedies is that in some descriptions it takes on the form of ice. At the time of the play it is winter, whereby ice and snow are omnipresent on the bog. Hester mentions how 'the age of ice have returned',⁷⁰ as it was a similarly harsh winter when Hester was born.⁷¹ The solid form of water breaks its fluidity and motional ability, creating an interruption not only in its physical flow but also in the metaphorical representation of the cyclical continuation of fate.

Throughout Carr's Midland trilogy, water has served as a metaphor for the cyclical flow of fate, as Millie, for instance, has already described her family's curse as a river

⁶⁷ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 300.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁶⁹ Hickman, 51.

⁷⁰ Marina Carr: Plays 1, 267.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

dragging her off. As this water turns into ice, its solid state temporarily interrupts the forceful motion of fate, whereby the cursed protagonist may have an opportunity to escape its reach. This interpretation explains why *By the Bog of Cats* is the only Midland Tragedy to openly offer a way to break the main characters' cursed destiny:

Catwoman: Just forget about her and lave this place now or ya never will.

Hester: Doesn't seem to make much difference whether I stay or lave with a curse like that on me head.

Catwoman: There's ways round curses. Curses only have the power ya allow them.⁷²

The Midlands' waters are once more tied to the curse, their fluidity and motion representing the continuation of the curse for the characters bound to it. As only in this play this motion is interrupted and the cyclical repetition of the curse is momentarily in question, in the *Oresteia* only the last iteration of the trilogy offers a way to break the curse. However, while Orestes accepts Athena's trial which will break the repetition of revenge within his family, Hester does not leave the Bog of Cats and thereby fulfils Robert's prophecy that the story will repeat itself for thousands and thousands of years yet.

These assessments of water allow for the conclusion that the boglands are conceptualised in a similar way to Carr's previous two Midland tragedies in serving as a metaphorical Styx. The Styx prevents the ghosts of its protagonists from entering the Underworld, whereby they, in turn, haunt the next generation of women until their fate been fulfilled similarly to their own. Critics such as Bourke have recognised before that Carr establishes a cycle in which her characters die, but are re-assimilated into nature, particularly

⁷² Ibid., 276.

into water.⁷³ However, they have yet failed to draw the connection to Carr's classical reception and to explain why water would come to assume this role. Recognising that the waters represent a modern, Irish version of Styx explains its connection to death and the Underworld more eloquently than previous interpretations of her plays, and it links Carr's interest in the influence of the classics and classical writers with her context as a modern Irish dramaturgist.

In addition to their ties to the Styx, it can also be concluded that the ghosts in Carr express a clear sense of Greek fate, as both their death and their supernatural return is pre-inscribed through a destiny revealed in part through their genealogy, memory and premonitions. Carr's evocation of Greek tragedy as her play's origin, together with the many references to fate and prophecy, emphasise that the modern adaptation is conceptualised as a simulacrum, bound to repeat an ancient story. This sense is deepened through Carr's repetition of one main narrative trope throughout her Midland tragedies; the suicide of the main protagonist and the confinement of her spirit at the river Styx. In all her reception she thereby subordinates accuracy to the classical sources to emphasising the process of repetition, taking recognisable tropes and references from her ancient Greek sources but never retelling the story faithfully.

Carr herself stresses the importance she places on the construction of a cyclical time in her plays when she claims that: 'I have never believed that time is linear' and elaborates: 'we are of time, but also beyond it. And to forget that is the problem. Everyone forgets that they are also outside of time – that they are both within *and* outside of it. [...] We are as much *not* of this world, as we are of it. And how to capture that in the theatre is the huge

⁷³ Bernadette Bourke, "Carr's 'Cut-Throats and Gargiyles': Grottesque and Carnavalesque Elements in *By the Bog of Cats*...", 133.

challenge'.⁷⁴ Carr's establishment of a cyclical time, reinforced by the presence of ghosts, ties into her plays' Irish context through the Midlands' construction as transgressive spaces. In their setting, Carr's plays both affirm and deny any easy definition as distinctively Irish, since while the Midlands of her plays are steeped in Irish culture and identity and are set in the present, the identity represented does not cohere easily with contemporary Ireland. Carr's characters inhabit primarily rural communities and are characterized by their isolation and inwardness: they depict an Ireland that the Celtic Tiger would have long left behind. Her use of the Irish landscape as a metaphorical representation of Hades emphasises how the Ireland she depicts is haunted by the spirits of its past, which makes it impossible to move on to a post-Tiger present. This serves as a cogent warning in the current re-assessment of national identity in contemporary Ireland in the light of factors such as the peace process, the economic boom, and the changing racial demographics of a society with a growing immigrant population.⁷⁵

Through discussing predominantly Carr's classical influences, however, this paper has demonstrated that readings which only focus on the Irish context of her plays are reductive in terms of Carr's broader concerns. In 'Dealing with the Dead' Carr emphasises that her concern with memory and communications with the dead goes far beyond Ireland, as she deliberates how '(t)he whole world and all its civilizations have been shaped by this great panoply of the dead, whose voices we unconsciously, hear all around us'.⁷⁶ Rather than focussing on only Irish issues, this essay reveals her to address similar questions to Derrida's 'Spectres of Marx', which tries to determine the possible implications of the living coexisting with the dead. Like Carr, for Derrida, 'this being-with specters would also be [...] a politics

⁷⁴ Qdt. in Sihra "Reflections," 110.

⁷⁵ Paula Murphy, "Staging Histories in Marina Carr's Midlands Plays," *Irish University Review* 36.2, 398.

⁷⁶ Carr, 190.

of memory, of inheritance, and of generations',⁷⁷ representing a spectral paradigmatic chain determining the expression of being and meaning.

Through her Midland Trilogy, Carr has tried to use classical reception to play out the implications of the dead coexisting with the living. By presenting the effects of this as inherently negative, inevitably ending in suicide and murder, Carr demonstrates how, by not recognising the haunting of one's past, one is bound to repeat it. She thereby re-emphasises the importance the Greeks placed on recognising oneself and one's past, γνῶθι σεαυτόν, in order to shape one's own destiny. While Carr's Midland Trilogy makes it clear that this is an ancient lesson contemporary Ireland should take note of, her construction of Ireland as a mythical and unreal country also indicates that she attempts to broaden the lesson's appropriateness to '(t)he whole world and all its civilizations' who 'have been shaped by this great panoply of the dead'.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Transl. Kamuf, Peggy, xviii-xix.

⁷⁸ Carr, 190.

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