SPATIALIZATIONS OF THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH DRAMA BY WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION/INSPIRATION

About a decade and a half ago, before writing my candidate degree dissertation on contemporary Irish drama, I drew up a detailed plan and sent it to Christopher Murray, a distinguished scholar and internationally known expert of theatre studies in Dublin, asking him for his opinion. Replying in a friendly letter he said that he approved of its details on the whole, but pointed out the complete absence of women writers and inquired why I had not included any works by Anne Devlin and Christina Reid, for instance, in the list of plays to be analyzed. In hindsight, I wish I had heeded the male colleague's discretely implied suggestion. By that time I had read some of the said dramatists' works, but found them so different from those of the male writers in terms of both subject and technique, that they simply did not fit in with the structure and paradigm emerging for me from the male authored material. Thus I completed the dissertation barely mentioning the work of female playwrights, and the book I transformed it into a few years later under the title *Nemzeti önszemlélet a mai ír drámában* (1960–1990) (National Self-Portrait in Contemporary Irish Drama [1960–1990]) also lacks any substantial analysis of women's drama.

What caused me only a bit of unease at that time grew into a sense of having missed something important by the mid-1990s. I know now that this notable change was due to my listening to or reading the papers of some fellow women scholars in Hungary, Sarolta Marinovich among them in the first place, which led me to realize how wrong I was to write my book without trying to understand and interpret the "otherness" of strategy and style in Irish women's drama. My only excuse was that only around and after 1990, where the chronology of my above

mentioned book stops, did drama by women in Ireland make a considerable and more widely acknowledged breakthrough. An interesting parallel offers itself in the development of Irish Studies which started to deploy the discourse of post-colonialism around the late 1980s and assimilated it as an indispensable paradigm of analysis by our time, but has been definitely slower to apply feminist criticism in spite of the historically shaped, powerful links between nation and gender. Or rather, I should say, because of them, given the ever so delicate borders of their interface? Challenged by the fact that there seems to be so much to reconsider and scrutinize concerning the ways theatre by women explores the female experience in the Irish context, I have decided to broaden the scope of my research in this direction. Gratefully thanking the inspiration I received from Sári and other members of our little community of Hungarian women scholars involved in English Studies as it intersects with Gender Studies, my paper intends to share some insights into the many-sided achievement of Irish women playwrights with them.

DRAMA BY WOMEN IN IRELAND

The beginning of writing drama by women in Ireland dates back to the 18th century when theatres, like other institutions of the country, represented mainly colonial interests. Under the divisive socio-political conditions of colonialism the genre itself had a discontinuous history until the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897, but kept on following a gendered trajectory beyond that, into recent times. Thus it took considerable time for female authors to find their place in the canon of modern Irish drama. A couple of examples can well illustrate this point. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's mother, Frances Sheridan was a playwright on her own, the author of works which can boast of great comic creations. She was, however, unjustly overshadowed by the fame of her son and the other male playwrights of the period. Doing her work due credit, in 1999 *A Journey to Bath* (1766) written but left unfinished by her was completed by young half-Hungarian playwright Elizabeth Kuti under the title *The Whisperers* for Rough Magic, an innovative theatre company in Dublin at the suggestion of their woman director, Lynne Parker. Early in the 20th century, Lady Augusta Gregory, one of the initiators of the dramatic renaissance and a highly active director of the Abbey Theatre for long years, started to write her own pieces for the national stage. Yet Gregory's oeuvre, which included one-act comedies, full length historical plays, as well as translations was viewed as secondary to the drama of W. B. Yeats or J. M. Synge. A crucial example of this neglect is that though *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902) was co-authored by Gregory and Yeats, the audience came to know it as the poet's play, despite the fact that, given her knowledge about the mind and speech of the

peasants, Gregory had actually had a fair share of writing the play.[1] In our time, one of the signs of the increasing appreciation for her work is manifested by the "Lady Gregory Autumn Gatherings" at Coole, a series of events consisting of lectures and productions organized annually since 1995.

Following Gregory by a few years, Teresa Deevy became the next important representative of women playwrights in Ireland. Her first works were presented by the Abbey in the 1930s and earned success, but then the conservative and biased leadership of the theatre, which reflected the increasingly isolationist politics of the postcolonial nation state, closed the doors against her from 1942.[2] The fate of her literary ambitions can be seen as emblematic under the circumstances. During the 1940s and 50s the writing and production of drama by women was not favored or encouraged in a country whose new constitution defined the role of women in terms of the demands of the domestic sphere. Deevy's exclusion from the allegedly public domain of the theatre was also part and parcel of the larger picture: Irish-born male playwrights Sean O'Casey and Samuel Beckett spent many years of their life in self-chosen exile from Ireland, mostly because they did not approve of the home conditions and their restrictive effects of those on culture and art. After several years of absence from the theatre, Deevy's *Katie Roche* (1936) enjoyed a revival on the national stage in 1994, and in 1995 the scholarly periodical *Irish University Review* devoted a special issue to her work in the context of some other female playwrights.

Against the backdrop of a fast changing Ireland, and catching up with the relevant developments of contemporary drama in other Western countries, female voices in the Irish theatre began to make themselves heard more intensely since the 1980s than it was the case before. This highly welcome process, however, has had its ambiguities: while "[t]he cultural climate is becoming more receptive to female-authored drama, and recent plays by Marina Carr and Marie Jones, for example, have stimulated critical debate and drawn large audiences [...] many women have had to produce and publish their own work, as they have not had institutional support."[3] Female playwrights in our days engage with and respond to a social milieu whose customs and discourses are not free from some long persisting negative elements of the patriarchal system in both North and South. Considering women's position and the precarious case and checkered fate of feminism in Northern Ireland set against the context of the whole of Ireland, Imelda Foley writes:

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1 Pethica 1988, 12.

2 O'Doherty 1995, 26.

3 McMullan and Williams 2002, 1236.

> The cultural constructs that have impeded a development of feminist perspectives in Northern Ireland are those relating to both the Irish Republic's constitution for nationalists and fundamentalist Christianity for the unionist community. The former's dictate of the place of women in the home is replicated by the espousal of loyalty to the men of Ulster.[4]

Testified by recent sociological investigations, male domination is still stronger in Ireland than in most European countries. Ample evidence can be found for the presence of the inherited patterns and practices of the "confinement of women to the sphere of motherhood and the family, and obsessive concerns with controlling sexuality [...] [so that] women continue to bear psychological burdens associated with oppression."[5] Contemporary drama by Irish female authors tends to challenge the restricting convictions and stereotypes underpinning the discourses about gender, and exposes also the comparative rigidities of the social structure in which these are rooted and continue to be influential. Regarded in terms of form and dramaturgy, their work resists conventional ways of constructing images of women, while making attempts to negotiate and reshape those images through experimentation largely in the threefold locus that theatre critic Lynda Hart identifies as "[l]anguage, space, and the body."[6] The rest of the present paper focuses on the alternative deployment of space as well as spatial metaphors in some contemporary Irish plays by women, which I consider to be representative.

IRISH DRAMA AND SPACE

In his article about the Irish sense of place Patrick Sheeran argues that "[h]istory [...], has deprived us of our significant spaces. In response to this deprivation the names of places and their associated tribes and families – the most portable of possessions – have been exhibited as a way of memorializing a lost world and of maintaining some sort of identity." A profound concern with place, he adds, has become a salient aspect of the native tradition.[7] Throughout the colonial period, under the conditions of imposed foreign rule and order Irish literature, oral and written, became characterized by a rich occurrence and exceptional variety of space and related tropes. Against the socio-political dispossession and geographical displacement of a large part of the native population there emerged a culture which

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4 Foley 2003, 24.
5 Moane 1996, 109.
6 Hart 1989, 13.
7 Sheeran 1988, 191–192.

attempted to restore the links between places and people imaginatively. In her ground-breaking book on place in modern drama Una Chaudhuri contends that

> [B]elonging and related concepts, such as privacy, inclusion, participation, occupy the ideological heart of modern drama, which is above all else a drama about place, and, more specifically, about place as understood through, around, and beyond the figure of home.[8]

The history of the modern Irish theatre has been hallmarked by works which reconfigure the above issues in the national context, and demonstrate how they are related to, even entangled with a range of particular subjects during the process of decolonization. In postcolonial drama the traditional role of topography, geographical and architectural forms, has appropriated renewed significance through the evocation of the complex, at times troubled interconnections of location, national, cultural and individual identity, for instance in John B. Keane's *The Field* (1965), Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987), or the fairly recent play by Tom Murphy, *The House* (2000).

Place as subject and dramaturgical principle appears with special emphasis in the works of female playwrights. The place and position of women in various domains of Irish life still constituting contentious issues, the strategic use of theatre space, where internal and external worlds intersect, carries the potential of becoming a site of the multivalent exploration of the female consciousness. Women authors' plays tend to spatialize experiences which extend from a sense of incarceration to a determined search for freedom elsewhere, be it a physically existing or an interior, imaginary realm. Most of the plays "construct domestic space as problematic" to quote Chaudhuri again, who emphasizes that in the modern theatre "[t]he dramatic discourse of home is articulated through two main principles, which structure the plot as well as the play's accounts of subjectivity and identity: a *victimage of location* and a *heroism of departure*[9]." Feeling dislocated and marginalized in their closer and larger environment, several Irish female protagonists are shown crossing boundaries and moving away from a home, or the idea of a home others created for them through received language, inculcated beliefs and diverse practices of control.

The Irish Protestant Woman's Space in Christina Reid

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[8] Chaudhuri 1997, 27.

[9] Op. cit. 8, xii.

Tea in a China Cup (1983) by the Northern Irish playwright Christina Reid is set in Belfast, its action spanning from 1939 to 1972, from world war to sectarian warfare. The young female protagonist, Beth's evolving personal dilemmas are portrayed against the context of generations of her Ulster Protestant family, in which the place of women had long been defined and determined by the community's demand for their loyalty to their men and taking part in the perpetuation of prejudices and hostilities. Reid deploys the domestic space of the house where traditions are cultivated, but private interests remain grossly overshadowed by the concerns and fixities of the ideology and culture of loyalism. The home where Beth's mother, Sarah and herself have grown up is decorated by the photos of male family members of three generations in army uniform, making a proud demonstration of their self-sacrificing service of King/Queen and Country. Episodes of domestic life are framed by the public event often heard from outside, the sound of the Orange band playing at the 12th July parade, the grand occasion of celebrating Protestant supremacy and historical victory over the Catholics. Women's job is to pay attention to the little things, which, though seemingly private, are also regarded as part of the heritage distinguishing them from "the other" side, the Catholics: "Grandmother. No matter how poor we are, child, we work hard and keep ourselves and our homes clean and respectable, and we always have a bit of fine bone china and good table linen by us."[10] Discussed by a scholar, the custom of making and serving tea in the home functions as *gestus* in the drama, enacting the "social coerciveness and constructedness of gender," while its feminized discourse contributes to "the stability of the public sphere." Complicating this, however, "the women's solidarity and strength,"[11] signifies their liminal position with the inherent possibility that they may choose an independent course.

Representing the ways of how individual life in politically and culturally divided Northern Ireland is both regulated and delimited by communal issues and ambitions which work all the more effectively as they are internalized, Reid's drama critiques the system from within. It stages extreme situations that push the female protagonists to recognize and also find a voice to articulate the distorting pressure of the public narrative on their individuality. When called upon by British soldiers to leave the family house because it is threatened by an IRA attack, Sarah insists on not moving out: the home with its "bits and pieces" (57) means her whole being, not just the moments of feeling sectarian pride but also the private experience of loss and grief. Her daughter, Beth makes a step further by realizing that her marriage into a very traditional, Protestant Big House family, whose enviable attraction for others lies in their possession of a Belleek tea set of the finest china, is anything but

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[10] Reid 1997, 25. All further references are to the same edition, giving the relevant page numbers in parenthesis.

[11] Luft1999, 221, 215.

a personal decision: "I just sat down for a while, and got to thinking ... I'm getting married tomorrow, I'm moving from my mother's house to Stephen's house ... I've been my mother's daughter, and now I'm going to be Stephen's wife ... I've never been just me." (50) The image of the houses that belong to parent and spouse respectively suggests continuity and custom which protect Beth in both her old and new homes, whereas underscores the isolating secondary role she has been playing in her own life up to this point. Having become awakened to social, cultural and gendered confinement in her birthplace, Beth goes away from Belfast after her mother's death. This she does, however, not by rejecting the past altogether: she takes a fine china cup with her as a reminder of coming from a fragile culture that she might cherish but had better put in its place and not allow to dominate her life in the future.

Conflictual Spaces in Marina Carr

Dublin-based Marina Carr, who comes from the Midlands region of the Republic of Ireland, is celebrated most for three of her plays which can be read as a kind of trilogy. *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) explore the female protagonists' varied relation to self and community by showing them living in a family house, or highlighting that they are expected or demanded to live in one as their home. A symbol of domesticity, the house has been considered to be a female space for centuries, where women function as providers of care, wives and mothers, especially in a strongly patriarchal society like Ireland. Set in the rural part of the country, which had been known for preserving traditions in both outlook and lifestyle, Carr's plays seriously question and undermine the view of the house as a source of empowerment or satisfaction for her respective female protagonists. The discourse of home in them carries a complex sense of entrapment and restriction, which becomes contrasted by another kind of space, characteristically related to water and fluidity. According to Rosalind Clark, in Irish myth and folklore rivers, lakes, wells and the sea itself evoke the feminine, since women have been regarded as the source of bodily fluids "associated with sexual power, life-giving power, and destructive power,"[12] a belief continuing to inspire literary expression well into the 20th century. In the works of Carr the opposition between spaces representing civilization and nature invested with myths and stories underlines the female protagonists' need for and choice of an alternative to the atmosphere of the house, which they find unhomely and stifling.

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[12] Clark 1991, 136.

The Mai rewrites the memory play using a narrator called Millie, the protagonist, The Mai's daughter, who is haunted by "that childhood landscape," the "dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song," [13] and begins to inquire into her matrilineal heritage. The drama opens and closes with The Mai looking out of the window, the threshold of two contrasting worlds, the house and Owl Lake beside it. Planned by The Mai herself in the hope of attracting her husband back and re-stabilizing their relationship, the house is close to the beauties of nature symbolized by the swans that in Irish folklore are described as being loyal to their mates till death and references to them in the play serve as background to the overwhelming desire of the protagonist to restore mutual love in marriage. Yet her efforts remain unrewarded: after a brief reunion her husband resumes his extramarital affairs and, disappointed in love, she commits suicide in the lake. The Mai's unfulfilled dreams have their root in the emotional deprivation and hunger experienced by generations of Irish women, and the conflicting nature of this heritage is represented by the stories and memories of the one hundred year-old grandmother, a figure associated with folklore. Remembering her own unmarried mother, who named herself "The Duchess" and kept on waiting for the Sultan of Spain, the father of her daughter to come and save them, Grandma voices the power of dreams against the limitations of reality. This, however, involves the danger of cherishing too high expectations in life and love, as The Mai realizes: "... her stories made us long for something extraordinary to happen in our lives" (55).

It is really an extraordinary turn of fate, the renewal of perfect harmony in married life that The Mai longs for, and to achieve it she casts herself as a kind of angel in the house whose sole ambition is to wait for her husband to return to her. Necessarily, she is defeated by her illusory version of the mores grounded in the patriarchal system of values, which validates the woman through her role as loyal, self-effacing partner for the male. The origin of Owl Lake becomes known from an old legend, figuring a mysterious parallel between the cycles of nature and human fate: the beautiful maiden, Coillte was pushed into the lake her own tears made by the dark witch of the bog for whom her lover left her. Millie's telling the prophetic story evokes the image of The Mai's dead body held by her husband in a ghostly light at the window, a memento of the precarious moving of humans "like sleepwalkers along a precipice" (42) between life and death. In her story, The Mai is drawn to the lake of sorrow, which "seems increasingly to invade the interior space," [14] offering her escape from victimization by illusions. The family house she built and furnished cost her too much, her freedom of mind, and the way to regain

[13] Carr 1995, 71. All further references are to the same edition, giving the relevant page numbers in parenthesis.

[14] McMullan 2001, 82.

that is through re-alignment with nature in the form of physical death, following the choice of many split-minded heroines in an international literary matriliniage.

In *Portia Coughlan* the eponymous woman protagonist is trapped between two completely different spaces. The house where she lives is the centre of her married life with Raphael, an ambitious factory owner who demands that Portia serve her family as a housewife, keeping their possessions tidy and taking proper care of their children while also support his public image and business interests. Pressed to conform to these conventional expectations Portia feels that their house resembles a "choffin" where "sometimes ah chan't brathe anamore."[15] The nearby Belmont River is also associated with death, it was there that Portia's twin brother, Gabriel drowned himself by wading into the water fifteen years ago. However, aware of Gabriel's haunting and his songs on the bank of the river, the liminal space between the public world and the water but tempts Portia to brood over her former, symbiotic life with him. The mysterious attraction of the singing ghost suggests what she misses among the four walls of her family's middle-class house: the poetry of the unknown and the boundless flight of the imagination. She suffers from a keen sense of lacking what might complete her life and give meaning to it: "He woulda bin thirty taday as well ... sometimes ah thinche on'y half a'me is left, the worst half ..." (258). Portia and Gabriel had tried, when children, to sail out on the sea in a boat " 'jus anawheers thah's noh here' „ (275), finding water the element beside or surrounded by which and away from society they felt happy, at home and free.

The tension between the forces of home and the river is signified by the confrontation of two objects right at the beginning of the play. Raphael brings a birthday present, a vulgar-looking though apparently expensive diamond bracelet, bought to demonstrate prosperity rather than love for his wife. Markedly, Portia attaches more value to a box recently fished out of the river, which used to belong to herself and her twin brother. Applying Gaston Bachelard's concept about a "homology between the geometry of the small box and the psychology of secrecy,"[16] in contrast with the edginess and rigidity of the precious stones of the jewellery the worthless-looking yet emotionally treasured object evokes a space of intimacy and mystery associated with the Belmont River, the grave of the dead boy. Based on folklore and myth the river has its own story like the lake in *The Mai,* about a woman whose suffering was caused by the cruelty of people. Ostracized and condemned as a witch, yet she was healed by the powers of nature which eventually overbalanced the manifold biases of the human world:

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[15] Carr et al. eds. 1996, 25. All further references are to the same edition, giving the relevant page numbers in parenthesis.

[16] Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994. 82.

> [...] wan nigh' tha impaled her an stache wheer tha river now is, mayhap righ' here, an' tha left her ta die. [...] Bel, tha valla god heerd her, an' her cries near druv him mad. He could noh unnerstan' how her people could treah her so for she war wan a'thim, on'y a little different. He chem down tha valla in a flood a' rage, coverin' houses an' livestoche an' churches over, an' tooche tha ghirl in hees arms, down, down, all the way down ta tha mouh a' th'Atlantich. (267)

The legend offers a parallel to Portia's increasingly outcast fate among her own people and subsequent death in the river as a form of escape, which unites her with Gabriel, her long missing other half and helps her become whole again. Spatialized by the opposition of the family home and the river, one imprisoning while the other mysteriously drawing the woman to itself, Gabriel's newly felt absence "reveals the gap/space which desire cannot fill, that between Self/Other," and water symbolizes "the flux of desire – a Lethe-like borderline, which Portia eventually crosses when she fulfils the suicide pact first made fifteen years ago."[17]

Action in act two and three is chronologically reversed in the play. Portia's dead body, just raised out of the water like the little box earlier, and clutched to himself by her husband as his property in a riverside tableau with members of family and community around, is shown on stage in the middle of the play. Set indoors, the concluding scene of act three focuses on the living Portia's confession of her deepest secrets to the abhorred Raphael, and his concomitant rejection of the woman in her troubled, transgressive reality. Read with Héléne Cixous, who speaks about the woman being loved only when "absent or abused, a phantom or a fascinating abyss,"[18] the scene with the dripping body enacts that the protagonist is accepted and revered once she has become an object of ritual and mourning. In this light, the structural arrangement of the acts disrupts the conventional logic of causal relations with multiple effects. On the one hand it suggests that Portia is as much as dead for the indifferent world before she has actually left it. On the other hand, she appears as a haunting, disturbing presence even after her death, a ghost reminding the living of the fragility of boundaries.

The last piece of Carr's trilogy, *By the Bog of Cats* is recognizably though loosely modeled on Euripides's *Medea,* the treatment of its combined issues of gender, identity and space grounded in the archetypal. According to Melissa Sihra, while The Mai is portrayed indoors, at times looking out, and Portia flirting with the threshold between land and water, the new protagonist, Hester "crosses spatial boundaries more radically."[19] In opposition to the house, symbolizing settlement,

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17 Llewellyn-Jones 2002, 79.

18 Hélène Cixous: *"Aller à la mer."* In Drain ed. 1995, 133.

19 Sihra 2000, 261.

it is the characteristic Irish landscape, the vast, steeping bogland where she feels at home. Before Carr, the bog had become engendered in literature, suffice it to refer to Seamus Heaney's poem *Bogland,* where its "wet centre bottomless" [20] evokes Ireland's traditional allegorization as feminine. The link between nature and humans is reinforced by Carr through stories mostly told by a folktale-based figure, the Catwoman who, having a foot in both domains as her name shows, mediates between the two. She narrates how the newborn Hester was taken by her mother "over to the black swan's lair" [21] on the bog to lie there as her natural home. Carr, however, subverts the original trope of woman representing the land and its people by depicting the society around her heroine as split along the lines of economic interest, gender and race. Having her mother's tinker blood in herself, Hester as a woman is a born outsider and remains one in contrast with the established people, whose world fails to accommodate her. Settled life in a house with her lover, Carthage Kilbride worked only temporarily for Hester. Abandoned by him for the sake of his marriage with a prosperous farmer's daughter, she refuses to obey the man's demand that she should move from the bog to another house in town and bring their daughter up there. Enrica Cerquoni writes that Hester's "association mainly with open or unfixed spaces such as the swan's lair, the caravan, the yard and the bog seems to suggest a whole reconceptualization of the notion of home/homeland for female characters." [22] The liminal and permeable space of the bog attracts her as the domain she can link with her mother whom she saw there last, and a life of freedom. Longing for renewal through the maternal she lost, Hester rejects the limitations that the patriarchal order is all too ready to impose on her, its power represented by a Creon-like authority figure:

> XAVIER: Look, Swane, I don't care about your family or where ya came from. I care only about me own and all I've left is Caroline and if I have to plough through you to have the best for her, then that's what I'll do. I don't want to unless I have to. So do it aisy for all of us. Lave this place today. (40–41)

The misogynistic, commercially driven rule of Xavier is, however, thoroughly destabilized in a carnival scene unfolding at the wedding dinner of his daughter and Carthage. His own house, where the dinner is set, turns into a site of the rebellion of the powerless: together with the bride, four women appear wearing white, thus

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[20] Heaney 1990, 18.

[21] Carr 1999, 22. All further references are to the same edition, giving the relevant page numbers in parenthesis.

[22] Cerquoni 2003, 182.

making a parody of the culturally defined role and meaning of the social event and the iconic value of the wedding dress.

Carr's subversive dramaturgy offers an alternative of the carnival as well, in that once the disruption and chaos it causes and feeds on are over, the usual order is not restored as the conventions of the device would require.[23] Medea-like Hester resorts to violence as the available means of resistance: she sets the house and property of Carthage on fire and then kills not only herself but also her daughter, to prevent that she become dislocated and vulnerable by losing her mother like herself. Only by these terrible, savage deeds is she able to reclaim agency and challenge the oppressive measures of patriarchy. Carthage's conscience-stricken hauntedness in the future is prefigured as wandering in his "big empty childless rooms" (74), the spatial image signifying loss and loneliness. At the same time, death liberates both Hester and her daughter from having to live in the physical and psychic incarceration that the patriarchal world involves for them. They are going to become spirits who rise with the "purlin' wind" (80) on the open, female territory of the Bog of Cats, ghosting and disturbing the "sleepwalkers."

Elaine Aston the Feminist drama critic appropriates Julia Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and symbolic modes to discuss "women's drive towards the semiotic" in the theatre and their tendency to produce texts which "explode the symbolic" as a specific alternative feature of female playwriting.[24] The pieces of Carr's trilogy realize the power of the semiotic through the poetically expressive use of fluid, maternal spaces whose mysteries and secrets attract the protagonists to themselves as empowering forces in opposition to the symbolic system of laws and rules. This effect is enriched by the Midlands dialect in the plays, most forcefully in *Portia Coughlan,* which carves out a rhetorical space evoking the sounds of Irish, the national language, the ancient mother tongue of the people largely suppressed by English as a result of colonialism. Completed after the trilogy the play *On Raftery's Hill* from 2000 also places its action in the writer's original homeland, rural Ireland. Continuing with the intertextual references of her earlier work it incorporates elements of Greek myth which are, however, just the vantage point to dramatize the combined issues of incest and intra-familial violence in our world. Perhaps Carr's most Beckettian, *On Raftery's Hill* has a particularly dark vision reinforced by the definite lack of any alternative space for the female characters to escape from their monstrous father-lover's paralyzing while also strangely seductive dominance that alienates them from each other and ties them to the house on the hill.

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23 See Bourke Op. cit. 143.

24 Aston 1995, 53.

The Space of Female Transformation in Marie Jones

Marie Jones's *Women on the Verge of HRT* (1995) uses, again, two very different locations. Act one takes place in a public space, The Viking House Hotel in Donegal where the popular singer Daniel O'Donnell welcomes his middle-aged female admirers to his annually held tea party, whereas act two is set outside, on the beach of the bay at dawn. Contrasted, they spatialize the protagonists, Vera and Anna's changing way of experiencing and coping with the problem of aging and loss of value on the sexual market, which threatens them with invisibility.[25] The hotel bedroom as setting is associated with a social event which is heavily gendered, its participants are mature women. Vera ironically observes that ladies like themselves are "just a big mass of middle-aged nobodies,"[26] implying that the party may well turn out to be but an occasion to face their own mirror images in the others and become reminded of the narrowing of the social space they inhabit. The comparatively small and unhomely room where they are during the whole first act represents physical and also ontolological confinement. Moreover, Vera and Anna's exchanges, which revolve around the problem of aging and a corollary of related anxieties, highlight an even more subtle kind of imprisonment by the discursive space regulated and made available for them by the categorizing practices of the culture they live in. It is manifest through their persistent use of a received vocabulary, the habitual choice of stereotypes and clichés referring to the symptoms and consequences of menopause.

The obtrusive presence of the two narrow, convent-style single beds Vera and Anna are preparing to occupy for the night marks the hotel room as an oppressively gendered area, an extension of the particular social space of the party, exposing the women's shared loneliness and the fact that they have to do without sexual partners. They experience their bodies negatively, as a site of dispossession and humiliation, their respective comments testifying to an increasing of the "tension, ambiguity, and duality" which, Stanton B. Garner observes, characterize a "woman's modalities of bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality" and underlie the tendency that she thinks of her body as an object.[27] Vera is painfully conscious of the impossibility to have an unmediated, untainted view of her body: "I stood in the changing room of C&A the other day with a whole pile of clothes and I didn't know what to buy. I just stood there looking in the mirror and I says; Vera, you don't know what you are supposed to look like anymore" (13). On her part, Anna describes her own

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[25] Llewellyn-Jones: op. cit. 76.

[26] Jones 1999, 7. All further references are to the same edition, giving the relevant page numbers in parenthesis.

[27] Garner, Jr. 1994, 201.

menopausal symptoms through the lens of her dismayed husband, while barely mentioning how they affect her personally: "Dead embarrassing in company. It used to drive Marty mad. And then he would whisper to whoever was in our company 'It's the change.' [...] He might as well saying leprosy the way he twisted his face and rolled his eyes" (19). In short, influenced as well as manipulated by social images and categories, the protagonists are portrayed finding themselves on the verge of self-abjection, and not just on the verge of considering the hormone replacement tablet to be a possible remedy for feeling different.

In sharp contrast with the former physical confinement, act two of *Women on the Verge* is set on the open shore of the sea shortly before dawn, which constitutes a liminal space and hour, the realm of magic and transformation. The offstage presence of the male pop-singer is replaced by the wailing ghost of the Banshee, a solitary female spirit associated with mourning in Irish folklore. Patricia Lysight claims that the Banshee haunts the living by her lamentations and expression of grief, and her favourite time is "the dark or grey hours: midnight, dawn and dusk," while she favours to dwell in places near water and nature formations like strange-looking rocks.[28] Jones' *mis-en-scène* renders all this visible. A version of the Banshee's story involves her ruthless betrayal by a male fairy once she had grown old, and Vera recognizes her as a fellow victim of marginalization and stereotyping: "She could have been just like us. [...] You were not born a banshee. They made you a banshee" (22). For critic Margaret Llewellyn-Jones the Banshee's screaming is the displaced voice of Vera and Anna, whose sexual identity is threatened by annihilation through menopause, and, in this sense, the spirit does qualify as "a harbinger of death."[29]

The role of the Banshee in the play, however, is not exclusively the foreboding of loss but may be connected with a more ancient layer of inherited beliefs. Lysight clarifies that the origin of the Banshee goes back to the mythical sovereignty goddess who represents the land with its power to bestow identity, and acts also as a kind of guardian or patron "concerned with the fortunes of her people."[30] Away from public territory, on the Banshee-controlled "verge" of the shoreland the protagonists are both audience and performers in a series of free-moving, imaginary scenes, an alternative reality introduced by the spirit's cries. Dissenting from mimetic strategies, the reshaped dramaturgy makes space for a revaluation of aging and the subversion of prevailing stereotypes by recontextualizing expected forms of gender behaviour. Vera and Anna's "Finale Song" celebrates female re-embodiment through a kind of Kristevan *jouissance,* a sense of ecstasy which implies meaning[31]

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28 Lysight 1998, 10, 52, 59–60.

29 Llewellyn-Jones op. cit. 77.

30 Patricia Lysight op. cit. 92.

31 See Aston op. cit. 56.

– secured by the women's appropriation of the ancient function of the Banshee to renew their own feminine identity rather than lament its loss. The meanings imposed by patriarchal constraints are overwritten by a more personal and flexible view of women's aging, which admits difference without the compulsion to traumatize it, and the unavoidable "verge" ceases to be a space of "cracking" and entrapment but re-emerges as a site of transformation.

Toward Her Own Story in Anne Devlin

Belfast-born playwright Anne Devlin's *After Easter* (1994) multiplies spaces in the form of the socially and psychologically specific stages of the migrant protagonist, Greta's not only geographical but also spiritual journey. A Catholic from Ulster living in England and married to an Englishman, her route in the drama leads from the psychiatric clinic to her native Belfast and then back to her home in London. What starts her on the journey is a crisis of identity she articulates as having been pushed to move to live in the "outer room" instead of the "main room" [32] of her self, underpinned by a keen sense of displacement and double invisibility. Like many other rootless people who are unable to feel at home in the new environment she became "a copier ... out of fear," including herself with immigrants like "the man from Mayo [and] the Hindu Child" (59), who never really arrived in England. A self-renewing version of diasporic identity can be achieved, however, only by revising her understanding of home, which necessitates that she revisit scenes of her past. Back in Belfast, in various public places, a convent, a hospital and the city centre in addition to the family home, Greta is re-confronted with the religious, social and cultural divisions and prejudices in the patriarchal context of her birthplace under the Troubles. In Devlin's representation it is her placeless, liminal situation that allows her to perceive her the home society as one which determines people's attitudes and reactions whereas it also incites them to seek ways of transgressing strict boundaries and subvert the overused models of identity.

Visiting the convent Greta finds "a republic of letters" (27) organized around patriarchal dogmas and hierarchies where only male representatives of the Church are considered fully empowered, and her troubling personal problem can be treated only if she reconciles herself to the rules. She is but induced to steal a chalice to distribute wafers in the street, trying to bring peace to Belfast people as well as voicing the need to restore real human equality from within the traditions of the

[32] Devlin 1994, 26, 28. All further references are to the same edition, giving the relevant page numbers in parenthesis.

Church itself: "If a woman can be a priest, God can be female. [...] It means that women might be loved" (57). The scene in the Belfast hospital reflects the sickness of a society paralyzed by sectarian divisions. Greta's younger brother Manus is playing the Irish tune "The Harvest Home" on his fiddle, which provokes mixed reactions, someone claiming he should play the loyalist "Ould Orange Flute" instead. A young pregnant woman, Melda, diagnozed mad, introduces the discourse of insanity and functions like a gothicized image of lonely and troubled Northern Ireland. Her babies were taken off her because of her psychic condition, paralleling the emigration of many young people from the chaos of the country. Yet she dances to the music Manus plays, managing to find a private language of transcendence even when distressed and abjected.

Greta's original family home is the most crucial stage of the journey. Rendered multi-layered by the father still being there as a dead body laid out, marking his presence in the minds while family members are trying to reinterpret the past, the familial space opens up a view of relationships from a distance. The tensions between mother and father are revealed as connected with the larger conflicts engendered by sectarianism in the society: their private space was grossly violated when they had to move away from the land she inherited because "[t]hey were on the wrong side of the river for Catholics" (68). Moreover, their life bore the imprint of intracommunial conflict since the father, a believer in communist ideals, on writing "to the newspapers attacking the church" (67) was refused employment by their own people, while his wife had to make ends meet by selling communion veils. Realizing these truths, the family enjoys a reunion in spite of the usual threats of the Troubles looming outside, and the scene enacts an alternative consciousness Manus sums up as "You can stay and get away" (70), a parallel to Seamus Heaney's "inner emigré" idea about the possibility to live elsewhere in the mind.

Back in England Greta is shown at Westminster Bridge in London, the last stage of the journey figured as a space of crossing, where the ultimate test takes the form of suicidal feelings. Throwing the bag with the ashes of her father and not herself into the river, she makes the crossing and symbolically gets rid of the burden of her patriarchal past in Northern Ireland. The closing scene displays Greta's transformed sense of home through a story she tells her child. It is about wandering and reaching places united with her mother and making friends with a stag, who represents the other. The narrated journey relies on a new perception of "reconnection, of belonging within motherhood and m/otherland,"[33] which emphasizes dialogue, the harmonization of different sides and principles:

> GRETA: [...] My mother and I were hunting. But because of the cold we couldn't feel anything or find anything to eat. So we sat down by the stream.

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33 Arrowsmith 1999, 142.

> I looked up and saw it suddenly, a stag, antlered and black, profiled against the sky. [...] The stag's face was frozen and I had to be careful because it wanted to kiss me, and if I had let it, I would have died of cold. But gradually as it ate, its face was transformed and it began to take on human features. [...] So I got on the stag's back and flew with it to the top of the world. And he took me to the place where the rivers come from, where you come from ...and this is my own story. (75)

Geographically undefined, the settings in the story combine and layer several places, configurations of both origin and continuity. Appropriating the traditional role of the *seanchaí,* the Irish storyteller, Greta transcends divisions and redefines experience by way of a privately constructed narrative, coherent and uncopied. The story restructures her sense of home as part of a newly developed diasporic identity, which enables her to inhabit more than one place and culture at the same time, and arrive in her adopted country at last.

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Reconsidered in Chaudhuri's terms, the protagonists in the above plays embark on "journeys" that lead them out of what they are no longer able or willing to cope with toward relocating themselves according to their own terms. In the case of Carr's work death means a redemptive escape to another stage of existence from the state of being treated as the eccentric and/or inferior other. The association of the heroines with liminal spaces, permeable between borders both physical and psychic, makes way for a new spatiality which, to seek analogy in Teresa de Lauretis's ideas, can serve as the "elsewhere of discourse," empowering women "to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective."[34]

The both thematically and technically challenging achievement of contemporary Irish drama by female authors, which has become realized in successful and well-received productions, is gaining a place for this body of works in the national canon that they never inhabited so assuredly before. Their cultural impact is summarized in a fairly recent critical account as follows:

> Women's writing for the theatre has contributed towards the diversity of models of theatrical practice, towards the search for new audiences, and towards the reworking of concepts of the family, of gender roles and of the nation, clearing a space in this art which has been so closely associated with

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[34] De Lauretis 1987, 25.

'the national identity' for the cultural representation of the complexity and diversity of women's lives and the expression of their creativity.[35]

The communal role of theatre has always been exceptionally strong in Ireland, where modern drama came into being as part of an inspired anti-colonial struggle and cultural renaissance with the aim to transform the life and mind of a whole nation. Negotiating this tradition, Irish female-authored drama today participates in the ongoing project of rebuilding the home of women by raising questions about certain discursive practices and social fixities. As a significant aspect of their dramatic arsenal, women playwrights draw inspiration from the century-old forms of Irish oral art including stories, songs, myths and legends in their works to locate the possibility of change in the borderless realm of the imagination and the liberating space of performance.

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[35] McMullan et al. op. cit. 1246.

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