

## REVIEWS

### **A Novel Inquiry into a Strategic Aspect of Irish Women's Theatre across a Century**

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<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2022/28/2/13>

**Hill, Shonagh. *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019. 257 pages. ISBN 978-1-108-48533-3. Hb. £75.**

Marvin Carlson, in his *The Haunted Stage* (2001), claims that a “vast body of potential recyclable material [is] offered . . . by the huge corpus of myths, legends, and historical writings,” and “certain stories or sets of stories in every era prove particularly attractive for retelling” (22)—recasting for the stage with alterations to speak to new audiences. Modern Irish theater came into being in an era when several writers of the Irish Literary Renaissance dug deep into Celtic as well as Greek mythology for subject matter that, through its relevance, could throw light on and help interpret the layered complexities of the contemporary process of decolonization in Ireland. Many a playwright resorted to borrowing and re-animating both male and female characters from the treasury of myths when developing their dramatic plots. However, as men dominated the Irish theater world almost until the end of the twentieth century, the representation of women was significantly influenced by male ideals and expectations. There had been few exceptions to this pattern up to the 1980s, but from then on, the number of Irish women playwrights and theater makers started to grow more steadily than before; they followed in the footsteps of “foremothers” such as Lady Augusta Gregory, Eva Gore-Booth, Alice Milligan, and Teresa Deevy. Notably, the female-authored drama of the past four decades often engages with myths, more so than plays forming the male canon of the same period, thus the process might even be called an Irish Women's Dramatic Renaissance.

*Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* maps the particular re-use and re-working of originally male-stamped myths by women playwrights and actresses from the early twentieth century to the first years of the twenty-first. The emphasis on the body in this corpus highlights an important difference from the legacy of privileging the verbal and literary over the physical and performative, which had been the norm for decades in Irish theater. Shonagh Hill describes the complex purpose of her book in this way: “Though the contexts differ, all the work studied in this book coheres around a self-conscious adoption of mythic narrative to critique idealized myths of femininity which support patriarchal structures and repudiate women’s cultural participation” (3). The author of the book also takes a look at stage performances, since they “interrogate the contingent and performative nature of myth and gender to articulate women’s experience of exclusion, as well as uncovering the possibilities for expressing a creative female corporeality” (3). To encompass this complexity, the theoretical embedding of her argument reaches wide, deploying insights from intersections of phenomenology and dramaturgy, feminism, gender, and queer studies to discourses of the body and affect. In all her analyses, the author directs attention to the physical aspects of women’s theater, highlighting “the creative,” that is, the affect generating “potential of the performing body” (103).

The book does not observe a strict linearity or chronology; instead, it connects authors, plays, and performances that speak to each other across decades about “women’s entrapment within tropes of femininity” (15) and share the ways in which elements of myths can be revised and/or dismantled through the moving female body. In the six long chapters, which are further divided into subchapters, Hill makes cross-references to kinships that confirm the presence of a genealogy of women’s self-assertive playwriting in Ireland while establishing reader-friendly structural links between the units. The first two chapters, “Revolutionary Bodies, Mythmaking and Irish Feminisms” and “Unhomely Bodies: Transforming Space,” probe into the historical

origins of female iconicity and also focus on plays that re-stage the heroines of the Ulster Cycle and their stylistic experimentation. Eva Gore-Booth's *The Triumph of Maeve* (1902) is analyzed in the context of "the complex and shifting relations between nationalism and feminism at the time" to show that the author recreated the combative mythical heroine as a pacifist feminist and wove "affective and evocative" poetic symbolism into the text (53–54). Many decades later, in *Women in Arms* (1984), Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy extends the scope by dramatizing not only the figure of Maeve, but also those of Nessa, Macha, and Deirdre. Hill considers Burke-Kennedy's representation of these women on stage as an idiosyncratically fruitful engagement with Brechtian techniques and effects.

The inter-communication of female-authored plays across time and historical changes is further exemplified by the parallel discussion of Lady Gregory's *Grania* (1912) and Marina Carr's *The Mai* (1994) in Chapter Three, titled "Metamorphic 'Bodies That Matter': Process and Resistance." In both dramas, the eponymous heroines suffer from "the material effects of the dominant structures of power," but they strive for renewal and "convey the experience of the lived and desiring female body to invigorate their mythmaking" (105–06). Their metamorphoses into a defiant queen and a dead and abject body, respectively, signifies their corporal resistance to the oppressive gendered treatment they have received from the men who did not recognize their personal needs and humanity. Chapter Four, "Staging Female Death: Sacrificial and Dying Bodies" explores how and why death becomes an act of resistance. Here Carr's *Ariel* (2002) is given due attention, with Hill bringing in, for comparison's sake, Edna O'Brien's *Iphigenia* (2003), subtitled as a "loose" adaptation of the Greek original, to suggest that Carr presents "a more radical reworking" (141) since her Iphigenia character, Ariel, returns as a ghost and "subversively accesses the stage space," thereby disrupting the "naturalist frame of the play and the linear narrative of Greek tragedy" (146). The peak of this chapter is the discussion of female self-sculpting in Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006), a play which again

reaches back to Irish mythology, and interprets the role of Scarecrow “as an uncanny double” who possesses and corporeally displays the “dangerous female energy of the crow-like Morrígan” (165). As such, she is not just the conventional death-bringer; her role also encompasses assistance with the “reperformance of Woman’s life” through an exposition of her gendered disappointments and failures (165). In fact, the alter ego function of Scarecrow testifies that an ordinary, nameless Irishwoman, whom Woman embodies in the play, has the potential to redefine her complex subjectivity, albeit only at the crucial threshold between life and death (see Kurdi 91).

Chapter Five, “Haunted Bodies and Violent Pasts,” delves deeper into the subject and performance of female hauntedness and death. Gore-Booth’s *The Buried Life of Deirdre* (published posthumously in 1930) is summoned as a kind of predecessor to Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* (1996). Gore-Booth’s play adds a new dimension to the old story with a reincarnation which undermines the conventional, tragic entrapment of Deirdre (201–02). The past keeps resurfacing in *Portia Coughlan* too, where the eponymous protagonist is haunted by her ghostly brother, Gabriel. Indeed, a vast number of reference literature provide interpretations of the Portia–Gabriel dyad and their relation to the river. According to Hill, Portia herself awakens to the understanding that Gabriel is functioning as a “surrogate for something that has been lost”; he is the uncanny double, which can be craftily staged in a theater performance, as documented in the book (193–94). Here, as at other points, Hill relies on Judith Butler when calling Portia and Gabriel “ghostly and unruly bodies,” which “fail to comply with constricting gender roles and thus are not accommodated as bodies that matter” (199). One should note, however, that Portia tries to (or is persuaded to at least try to) live like other women who marry, have children and keep the house, but she fails, and on her thirtieth birthday feels that her complex individuality, of which Gabriel is a part, cannot be recovered in this life. In contrast to Stephanie Pocock Boeninger’s postcolonial reading of Portia as a character who “long[s] for access to an

idealized, precolonial past” (154), Hill argues that *Portia Coughlan* offers a critique of “neoliberal postfeminism” with its “illusion of freedom” in the Celtic Tiger period (210).

The final chapter of the book, “Olwen Fouéré’s Corpus: The Performer’s Body and Her Body of Work,” highlights the river again as the “protagonist” of *riverrun* (2013), Fouéré’s performance of a part of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939). In tandem with it, Hill analyzes her performance of Laurent Gaudé’s *Sodome, My Love* (2010), which thoroughly reshapes the story of Lot’s wife, who became a pillar of salt as punishment for looking back. Hill reads the reanimation of this figure as a means of staging female resistance to being silenced and incarcerated as a “mythic statue” by shedding patriarchal inscriptions off her body and presenting an “excribed-being” (224–25). Instead of a “Conclusion” proper, Hill summarizes the volume in the last sentence of Chapter Six, stating that the examined corpus of “women’s mythmaking in Irish theater is the excribed edge of women’s corporealities; their unhomeliness; their revolutions; their metamorphic transformations; their deaths and resurrections; and their haunting remains, all of which refuse to be contained within, and thus rewrite, myth” (236). The river-like flow of female mythmaking for the stage does not stop at the period placed behind the last word of the closing sentence, the lack of a “proper” ending seems to suggest. I recommend the book to those researching Irish drama, and modern theater in general, especially if they also expect to read lucidly formulated and terminologically precise observations and thoughts about the intersections between classical myths and Irish women’s new achievements for the stage. Readers of the book may also find another kind of *recreation* in the transformation of the author’s immersive experiences into critical discourse.

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