

RESENHAS/BOOK REVIEWS

Sihra, Melissa. *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown*. Palgrave, 2019.

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Marina Carr is one of Ireland's most celebrated dramatists; yet, perhaps paradoxically, she has also been under-appreciated in many ways. She regularly appears on lists of Ireland's major writers, but both scholarly attention and theatrical production have tended to fixate on a relatively small number of her works, a quartet of midlands plays that premiered between 1994 and 2000. *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) and *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) certainly merit the attention they have received, but they account for a very small proportion of her theatrical output and writing life to date: she has written more than a dozen other plays, and her career recently entered its fourth decade. It can thus be argued that the prominence of the midlands works may have distorted our appreciation and understanding of Carr's broader artistic interests and achievements.

Similarly, her status as Ireland's most prominent female playwright has had both positive and negative consequences. As the only woman since 1950 to have had more than one play on the mainstage of the Abbey Theatre, Carr has become a focal point for arguments about gender inequality in Irish literature and culture. That status has meant that her achievements have rightly been celebrated, but perhaps it also explains why her work often encounters a weight of expectation far greater than any one playwright (male or female) can fairly be expected to bear. As a result of such expectations, she has sometimes been criticized for doing things that earn others praise. Rather than being admired for her commitment to formal and thematic experimentation, Carr has often encountered negativity when she writes work that seems too radically unlike plays such as *By the Bog of Cats*, which, despite its undeniably tragic mood, is one of her most accessible works.

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This is not to suggest that Carr's work in its entirety has been ignored by scholars. Anna McMullan and Cathy Leeney (2003) co-edited a collection of essays called *Before Rules Was Made* in 2003 for Carysfort Press—a book that was widely praised upon its publication but which of course does not include any of the plays that Carr wrote from 2004 onwards, rendering its value for scholars more limited as Carr's *oeuvre* has expanded. Rhona Trench's 2010 monograph *Bloody Living: The Loss of Selfhood in the Plays of Marina Carr* (Trench, 2010) was important in being the first full-length single-authored study of her drama—but, being the first, it necessarily had to lay out ground that had not been explored much before, especially in relation to Carr's more adventurous later plays such as *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) and *Marble* (2009). There have also been important articles by scholars such as Miriam Haughton (2013), Siobhan O'Gorman (2014), Clare Wallace (2001), and Paula Murphy (2006), among many others—but of course the achievement of such articles has often been to highlight the merits of individual plays rather than analyzing the work in its entirety.

For these and many other reasons, Melissa Sihra's new study of Carr is exceedingly welcome (Sihra, 2007). Its subtitle is *Pastures of the Unknown*, an appropriately evocative phrase that situates Carr's work in a vision of the natural world that is both cyclical and nourishing, but which also indicates how we still have much to learn about her. The book pushes our knowledge of Carr into new territories, and seems likely to provoke a sustained re-interrogation of her status within the Irish and international theatrical traditions.

Sihra has long been admired as the leading interpreter of Carr's theatre. She is also well known as the editor of *Women In Irish Drama*, a 2007 collection of essays that—without exaggeration—can be said to have transformed the field of Irish theatre studies. That volume cast light on a subject that had hitherto been treated as if it were of tangential importance, usually being relegated to (or ghettoized in) self-contained chapters in broader histories of Irish theatre, most of which were dominated by the analysis of plays by male authors such as Sean O'Casey and Brian Friel. With a judicious selection of themes and contributors, *Women in Irish Drama* called attention to the relationship between the relative absence of female writers from Irish theatre history and the dominance of female characters on the Irish stage—demonstrating the existence of a “seen but not heard” dynamic that, as recently as the 2015 #Wakingthefeminists controversy about the exclusion of female dramatists from the Abbey stage, has continued to manifest itself.

As Sihra outlines in her introduction to *Pastures of the Unknown*, that dynamic has not only affected our understanding of Irish theatre history; it also has influenced—and indeed distorted—Irish theatre scholarship. “When I began researching Irish theatre in the 1990s the prevailing assumption was that ‘there was Lady Gregory in the Abbey and then along came Marina Carr sixty years later’ with no other women before or since,” writes Sihra (1). She also outlines how as a PhD student she was encouraged to decouple Gregory and Carr “as the dual female pillars in Irish theatre so as not

to exclude other women” (4). While acknowledging that this advice was based on a positive impulse to afford attention to the many female dramatists who have been forgotten or written out of history, Sihra describes the separation of Gregory and Carr as an “arterial severing” that results in a “non-history of women in Irish theatre” (4). As she inspiringly declares from the outset, “a feminist historiography requires a new methodology” (8): her ambition for this book, then, is to draw together the strands of Carr’s career—and of Sihra’s own scholarly work to date—in order to find new ways to think about what it means to write, teach and stage Irish drama now.

The book follows a roughly chronological approach to Carr’s work, but also includes several moments of comparison at which some of Gregory’s plays are also discussed. This gives rise to several combinations that are as satisfying as they are surprising. *By the Bog of Cats* is placed in dialogue with Gregory’s *The Full Moon* (1910), for example—a conjoining that reveals the shared interest in paganism, ritual and community in both plays. And Gregory’s co-authorship with WB Yeats of the 1902 play *Kathleen ni Houlihan* (a contribution that was actively suppressed by Yeats and has only been widely acknowledged since the 1990s) is used to introduce a consideration of how “women’s internalisation of oppression” is a preoccupation of *On Raftery’s Hill* (169). Many other Gregory plays feature, including *The Workhouse Ward* (1908) and *The Golden Apple* (1920).

This matrilineal approach to locating and contextualizing Carr’s drama has the benefits of encouraging readers to think again about Gregory’s work and of deepening our understanding of Carr’s place in literary history. It also allows for an investigation of Carr’s interactions with other female theatre-makers. Sihra points to the importance of Garry Hynes in the development of Carr’s career, for example: Hynes provided Carr with encouragement after the disappointing reaction to *Ullaloo* (1991), offering her a commission that led to Carr’s “breakthrough play,” *The Mai* (74). Hynes later directed the premieres of *Portia Coughlan* and *On Raftery’s Hill*. Sihra also offers information about Carr’s collaborations with Selina Cartmell, a director whose visually rich style made the Irish premiere of *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006) so memorable; Cartmell later directed the premieres of *The Cordelia Dream* and *The Giant Blue Hand* (2009), a play for children that, as Sihra demonstrates, deserves to be much better known.

Also of importance is Sihra’s exploration of how Carr engages with the international dramatic tradition. Readers of interviews with Carr will be aware of her indebtedness to Tennessee Williams and Shakespeare, for example—but Sihra extends that awareness into a considered discussion of the former’s influence on *The Mai* and the latter’s on *Portia Coughlan* and, of course, *The Cordelia Dream*. There is also much to learn here about how and why Carr chose to adapt Tolstoy (in *Anna Karenina*, premiered in 2016), but wrote a play about Chekhov (*Sixteen Possible Glimpses*, 2011). While attending to the differences between adaptation and biography, Sihra identifies these plays’ shared goal of challenging “the mythic status put upon. . . male writers” (250). And, at a time when adaptations of classical texts continue to be seen as secondary

artistic accomplishments, Sihra demonstrates that Carr's versions of *Phaedra* (2011) and *Hecuba* (2015) must be seen as essential features of her work—which, in its entirety, can be seen as an act of “remythologisation from women's perspectives” (271).

Also of great value is Sihra's analysis of plays that have been produced but not published. It says much about scholarly attitudes to theatre for young people that Carr's plays for children—*Meat and Salt* (2004) and *The Giant Blue Hand*—have not been considered important enough to publish. Sihra's attention to both is thus very welcome; so is her willingness to discuss them in separate chapters, implicitly asserting that they are integral to an understanding of Carr's *oeuvre* and should not themselves be separated out in a single chapter. She also gives valuable attention to plays that Carr has herself been unwilling to publish, showing that although *This Love Thing* (1991) and *Ullaloo* might not merit revival, they must be seen as important stages in the development of Carr's authorial style and status. The first of those plays, for example, was intended to be composed collaboratively in its original production by Tinderbox and Pigsback (now Fishamble)—a strategy that Carr had “mixed feelings” about. As Sihra notes, “Carr protected her position as author of the piece unlike Lady Gregory's acquiescence of her co-authorship of *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* to Yeats” (59). This may have resulted in a less than successful production, but it was clearly an important moment in Carr's emergence as a writer.

Another positive feature is how the book defines the primary characteristics of Carr's theatre in its entirety, especially as a result of Sihra's choices about areas of focus for each chapter. Readers who are familiar with Carr are unlikely to disagree with Sihra's decision to consider her quasi-Beckettian *Low in the Dark* (1989) in a chapter on early experimental work; nor will they be surprised to see *Marble* being considered a dream play, or *Sixteen Possible Glimpses* being discussed on a chapter on the nature of playwriting. But what is refreshing is how those perspectives allow for the reinterpretation of other plays. For example, *By the Bog of Cats*, as a reinterpretation of *Medea*, is also about the nature of playwriting and the de-mythologization of the male author. With its innovative use of narrative, her version of *Hecuba* is every bit as experimental as her earlier plays. And in her willingness to use dreams to trouble our understanding of the boundaries of the real in *Marble*, we can detect an iconoclastic attitude to the *status quo* that, this book makes clear, is evident throughout her body of work.

Pastures of the Unknown is, in essence, the book that Marina Carr has long deserved. It is richly analytical in its approach to the plays, and is enhanced by the inclusion of biographical information, details of significant productions, archival images, and the frequent presence of Carr's own voice. In suggesting that the unknown is a space from which material of value may be harvested, Sihra offers us a deeper understanding of Carr's drama—but she also encourages readers to consider what other “unknowns” remain to be discovered. The analysis of Lady Gregory presented here is an important pointer towards new approaches to historiography and methodology in the Irish tradition—and one comes away from this book with a sense of great anticipation for

Sihra's future discussion of Gregory, not to mention the many important books and articles that the present book will inspire. Also of huge value is Sihra's willingness to consider Carr in dialogue with writers from beyond Ireland—not just the figures previously mentioned, but also Ibsen, Pinter and many others.

For these and many other reasons, *Pastures of the Unknown* can be seen as a perfect unity of author and subject: like Carr, Sihra is attempting to challenge and rewrite traditions, myths, attitudes to authorship, and assumptions of what Irish theatre is, was, and can become.

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