Theatre of Possession: A Discussion of Marina Carr’s *The Mai* and the Theatre of Legend Making

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The purpose of this paper is to consider Marina Carr’s *The Mai* (premiered in 1994, published in 1995), as a complex narrative tapestry textured with colourful women’s stories and talk. This play resembles a patchwork quilt. It is composed of various pieces of stories and dialogue, and sewed together with a thread of narrative, by a narrator Millie, a daughter of *The Mai*. I will show the power of Carr’s various techniques of narrative and voice and the possibility that this play invites the audience to join the recurring dialogue on stage and question it. This paper will begin with the structure of the play, focusing on Millie’s role as narrator, specifically on her storytelling technique. This will involve analysis of *The Mai*’s suicide and her mother’s death, in relation to the social and cultural roles of women in Ireland.

Marina Carr (1964 - ) was one of the most successful playwrights in Irish theatre in the 1990s. Her career started with a comedy in the tradition of Beckettian theatre of the absurd, and her continued work in this genre is evident in her second play, *Low in the Dark* (1989). With her fifth play, *The Mai*, she adopted a more naturalistic style. Her use of tragic family drama was established in this play and the subsequent two plays: *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats* (1998). While *By the Bog of Cats* is a reworking of Euripides’ *The Medea* her most recent play, *Aeriel* (2002) returns to Greek myth. It is based on Greek tragedies about the Atreus family.

Some of her plays have already been staged in the United States and Britain. The 2001 tour of *By the Bog of Cats* in the States, with Holy Hunter as its protagonist Hester Swane, was well received. *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000) was staged with its original production in the Royal Court Theatre, London, in the same year. It is evident she has achieved recognition as one of the leading young Irish dramatists. However, “Marina Carr’s latest plays have created some controversy”, as Anna McMullan notes (81). She points out the suicidal ending of the female protagonist of *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats* and discusses *On Raftery’s Hill*, in which “Raftery’s two daughters are sexually abused by their father. This presents an extremely pessimistic view of Irish womanhood. Alternative futures are stifled, at a time when Ireland seems never to have had it so good” (81).

While McMullan observes that “Carr focuses on those who are marginalised from the success obsessed climate of the Celtic tiger, and confronts us with female difference and deviance” (81), Vic Merriman examines Carr together with Martin McDonagh in order to critique their plays. He questions their successes, focusing on Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* and *By the Bog of Cats*, and McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) and The Leenane Trilogy.

Merriman points out, “In an apparently bold oppositional stance, Carr’s and McDonagh’s successes have been built around plays which stage Ireland as a benighted dystopia. At a time of unprecedented affluence, Carr and McDonagh elaborate a world of poorly educated, coarse and unrefined” (59). The closer study of McDonagh’s plays lies outside the scope of this paper, (and there is also convincing argument against discussing these two playwrights together). However, the important point to note is that he suggests a dichotomy between the audience and the world they see on stage. He calls their plays ‘spectacles’, and criticizes that “they point to a turn away from public inquiry, a willingness to settle for a divided society, a fatal refusal of the difficult process of decolonisation itself” (61).

Whilst I do not concur with the thrust of his argument, it cannot be ignored that what he cautiously discerns as “the tendency of both playwrights to work toward spectacle at the expense of interrogation” (Merriman 63) is evident in Carr’s work, notably her recent two plays, *On Raftery Hill* and *Aeriel*. It is not be denied that these two plays seem to lean too much on action accelerated by a single plot, at the expense of investigation and fuller characterization of each personae. As the play develops a darker tone, we are left with less space and time to contain humour and colourful episodes. *Aeriel* rushes headlong on a single track with devastating results. On the
other hand, the overly long narrative of the protagonist, Fermoy Fitzgerald (in place of Agamemnon) does not fully explain his actions.

We should note that Carr's recent plays revolve around male protagonists, while her preceding trilogy plays focus on the female personaes. It is fair to say that Carr has been far more successful when dealing with the female protagonists. Particularly in The Mai, Carr shows the most complex characterization of each persona. Here we are presented with social issues and drawn into the drama itself while the boundaries between the stage and the audience are completely blurred.

Millie and the Role of Narrator

The Mai, Portia Coughlan and By the Bog of Cats are often cited as a kind of trilogy. Agonized longing for somebody missing is a prominent feature in her trilogy. In each tragic family drama, Carr analyzes the severe longing of each female protagonist, revealing diverse dimensions, and makes one think of what has created each longing, which finally ends in self-destruction. These three plays share a plot that each female protagonist ends her life in suicide, and have a similar dramatic structure in that their deaths are revealed in the middle of each drama. In addition, each play is located in a place with water: Owl Lake, the Belmont River and the Bog of Cats. Carr introduces a legend or a song connected to each locale, and each protagonist follows the same fatal path.

"When the sense of foreknowledge is pervasive in the plot," as Declan Kiberd argues in his book on J. M. Synge's plays, "there can be little room for resistance against fate. Insofar as there are artistic possibilities with such a plot, they will be lyrical rather than dramatic" (193). Kiberd also asserts: "In the work of a dramatic genius like Synge, however, this foreknowledge is turned into a virtue, since it encourages a critical attitude in the audience towards the production. The interest now lies not so much in what is done, as in how it is done — in the author's personal interpretation of the action" (193). What he argues here on Synge's plays is applicable to Carr's trilogy, specifically The Mai.

This is highlighted by a comparison with the other two plays. Act Two of Portia Coughlan has a shocking start with a pulley raising the dead body of Portia out of the river. The protagonist of By the Bog of Cats, Hester Swane's death is foretold at the very beginning of the play by The Ghost Fancier, a messenger of death from another world. Towards the end of the play, Hester's death is acted out on stage. On the contrary in The Mai, her death is dealt with in words rather than by such spectacle. In the closing of Act One, Millie tells the legend of Owl Lake. The legend goes that Coillte, daughter of the mountain god thought her lover, Bláth, Lord of all flowers betrayed her, and she is drowned by the dark witch into "a lake of tears" (42). As her story draws to a close, the audience sees The Mai's husband Robert standing on stage "with THE MAI's body in his arms, utterly still" (42). While this effect is spectacle, it must be noted that at this moment the audience already has foreknowledge of The Mai's death. Earlier to this, her death has been mentioned as "The Mai's waking" in one of Millie's narration that happens in the middle of Act One (28). Carr's maneuvering the death of The Mai is the least spectacular among her trilogy plays.

It is also worth noting that The Mai "is filled with premonitions of catastrophe", as Declan Kiberd points out on Synge's play: "Any folklorist who watched a performance of Riders to the Sea would feel no surprise at its tragic ending, for the play is filled with premonitions of catastrophe" (163). Kiberd's study, Synge and the Irish Language explores the measures of how Synge's research and knowledge on oral tradition of Ireland is concerned with his creation of the new form of theatre. His analysis on Synge's plays mentioned above will be of more significance when we observe that Carr uses many techniques and narrative of the oral tradition in working with The Mai. This merits further discussion.

Another thematic feature shared in these three plays is the problem of how we can deal with memories or the past as Carr calls it "Dealing with the Dead". Frank McGuinness notes: "Marina Carr is a writer haunted by memories she could not possibly possess, but they seem determined to possess her" (Dazzling ix). No ghosts appear on stage of The Mai, unlike in the other two plays. However, in The Mai, the dead comes to life in the stories or talk of the living, and the past appears on stage as real as the present. The borders between the present
and the past, and those between the dead and the living are blurred or dissolved. Let us consider the opening scene of *The Mai*.

*The Mai* opens with her husband Robert coming home after five years’ absence. The stage is “[a] room with a huge bay window. Sounds of swans and geese, off” (11). The window faces to Owl Lake. The first personae that appears is Millie. After she stands by the window, Robert enters with his bag and his cello case. His amazement in looking around the room suggests that he has never come to this ‘home’ before. He “opens the double door upstage, and sees a music stand” and “closes the door” (11). The Mai appears on stage, not knowing his return, and goes to the window, where “she looks out at the lake, waiting, watching”, but at the note of cello, “— startled — freezes, listens” (11). Only when the music piece finishes and after a short pause, dialogue begins between Robert and The Mai, in a very naturalistic style. Eventually, Millie joins their conversation, but after her parents exit, she begins to talk what has happened previously. Through Millie’s story, the audience learn that The Mai has been waiting for her husband for five years, and that it was The Mai who built this house on Owl Lake, “the most coveted site in the county. It was Sam Brady who sold the site to The Mai”(14).

This opening scene determines the tone of this two-act play. Notably, what dominates the stage is silence. The cries of swans and geese just heighten the surrounding silence. A note of music, which should be recognized as a sign of Robert’s existence, just shudders and ‘freezes’ The Mai. It strikes us as ominous and foretells a tragedy.

The cries of the swans and geese also are intrinsically related to the legend of Owl Lake. This will be told by Millie, at the close of Act Two: “Sam Brady told me that when the geese are restless or the swans suddenly take flight, it’s because they hear Blath’s pipes among the reeds, still playing for Coillte” (42). The audience are unaware of legend at this start, but Carr frequently makes reference to the legend to ensure the audience develop an association with it as the drama proceeds. In this play, it is not only Millie that tells her story. Eventually, the stage is filled with voices and talk of women. Among the colourful episodes told by each female personae, Grandma Fraochlan’s stories of her beloved late husband, the nine-fingered fisherman are of special vivacity, in the oral tradition of storytelling. Millie learns the technique of storytelling from her great grandmother Grandma Fraochlan. A problematic influence of Grandma Fraochlan as a storyteller will be taken up later.

Millie plays the crucial parts in this play. She acts as a sixteen-year-old daughter of The Mai and Robert, but she “remains onstage throughout the play”(11), and occasionally tells her stories to the audience as narrator. Although many arguments have been made in considering this play’s structure and Millie’s double role as compared to that of Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), there seems still more points to be investigated. *Lughnasa* starts and closes with narration by Michael Mundy as a young man, who recalls the summer of 1936 when he was seven and lived with his mother and her four sisters. Mary Trotter observes: “The women may seem the centre of the story, but the male narrator is firmly in control of the narrative, and we see the women exclusively through his eyes” (166). Like a frame, Michael’s narrative encloses the lives of the Mundy sisters, and he proposes to present their drama ultimately as his memories, as the past, “motionless in formal tableau” (Friel 1). From the beginning of the play, we know the drama on stage by the other players is what has already happened in the past.

Marina Carr has slightly changed the structure of Friel’s play for *The Mai*. Millie, as we have seen, appears on stage first, but before she narrates her story. The Mai and Robert have already started their conversation. In other words, Millie’s narrative does not enclose the drama of her parents as ‘her own’, and consequently the dialogue and action between her parents seems to continue as the present, rather than in the fixed past. The lives of The Mai and Robert appear to float on beyond Millie’s control. Anthony Roche remarks, “Marina Carr is among those who have restored the storytellers’ perspective to the drama”, and discusses Millie as the storyteller and Grandma Fraochlain (sic) as The Tramp in J. M. Synge’s plays (Woman 160). Roche rightly observes: “Millie and Grandma Fraochlain reintroduce and reorientate the key roles of the storyteller and the Tramp […], establishing less a line of continuity than a multiple embrace of the three women across chronological time in the recurring present of the play” (Woman 161). If history is considered a chronological and linear narrative, then what emerges in Carr’s theatre is something different. The past and the present co-exist, the living and the dead share the same domain.
Frank McGuinness, referring to the dialogue from *By the Bog of Cats*, describes the theatre of Marina Carr: "Death is a big country [cf. *Bog* 70]. And hers is a big imagination, crossing the border always between the living and the dead" (Programme).

The difference resulting from each narrative is often ascribed to the gender difference of its authors. Rather it comes from the specific modes of speech Michael and Millie adopt for each narrative. From this angle, let us now look at the beginning of the first narration of each play in detail. Friel's *Lughnasa* starts with the following speech by Michael.

**MICHAEL.** When I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936 different kinds of memories offer themselves to me. We got our first wireless set—well, a sort of a set; and it obsessed us. And because it arrived as August was about to begin, my Aunt Maggie—she was the joker of the family—she suggested we give it a name. She wanted to call it Lugh after the old Celtic God of the Harvest. [...]

Michael's narrative is essentially close to that of a historian or a TV commentator. Notably he introduces his Aunt Maggie as 'the joker of the family'. What is apparent in the dramatic structure is his way of talking, that is, the tendency to enclose or bracket the others' lives. Before Aunt Maggie acts or speaks herself as a personae, she is already described as such. Consequently, we come to see each personae through Michael's perspective and his naming. Now let us consider how Millie starts her first narration.

**MILLIE.** When I was eleven The Mai sent me into the butcher's to buy a needle and thread. It was the day Robert left us. No explanations, no goodbyes, he just got into his car with his cello and drove away. So The Mai and I went into town and sat in the Bluebell Hotel where The Mai downed six Paddys and red and I had six lemon-and-limes. Then The Mai turned to me with her sunglasses on, mough it was the middle of winter, she turned to me and said, Millie, would you ever run up to the butcher's and get me a needle and thread. Now at eleven I knew enough to know that needles and thread were bought in the drapery, but I thought maybe it was a special kind of thread The Mai wanted and because of the day that was in it I decided not to argue with her. So up I went to the butcher's and asked for a needle and a spool of thread and of course they didn't have any. [...]

The vastly different information we can get from each narrative is apparent. While Michael begins his speech with the definite year, 1938, Millie starts with her age. This reflects what matters to Millie: it is not an official chronological order of years that matters, but her private experiences. In addition, Millie invites the audience to share her experience, by asking them to calculate her age. The audience have just heard Millie is sixteen from The Mai's dialogue with Robert, so they know, by a simple calculation, the action took place five years previously. The age of the narrator Millie is thirty in the play, but it is not mentioned on stage. However, the audience are sure to realize that they have just seen on stage between The Mai and her husband belongs to 'the past', given the actor who plays Millie looks older than sixteen. On the other hand, we can precisely understand and feel touchingly The Mai's agitation at Robert's sudden disappearance, and how much care Millie showered on her mother. Now we have to recognize Millie's crucial role. She appears on stage first, and 'remains onstage throughout the play'. Millie is the first witness of The Mai's suffering and is the first to hear The Mai's most intimate feelings.

The important question to ask is this: What makes Millie's narrative so strikingly different from Michael's? Perhaps the ultimate strangeness of her opening remark. This heightens our distrust of the narrator. This doubt arrests the attention of the audience, and keeps them listening. What Millie does next is construct her story with small pieces of incidental information, to make the audience imagine how they lived. She transforms what initially
seemed strange into the familiar and usual. Millie describes what really happens as a sequence, the audience finds honesty and common sense in her accounts of her own wonder. The doubt aroused in the audience becomes reliance on the narrator through this process.

Patricia Lysaght, a scholar of the Irish oral tradition, emphasizes the importance of creating doubt in the audience's mind. She explains this method, by referring to a contemporary female storyteller, Jenny McGlynn: “Keep them in doubt; it keeps the stories going; it keeps the old traditions alive!” (38). Another scholar in this field, Angela Bourke notes that the teller of fairy legends asks to be believed, and explains the technique of how disbelief is deferred: “by using a low-key conversational tone, by speaking about a known and most probably adjacent landscape, and by including considerable circumstantial detail: names and occupations of people or descriptions of work and weather, for instance” (Virtual Reality 11). It is obvious that Millie adopts such a narrative technique using the storytelling tradition.

Here, we notice the importance of Millie’s second remark in her narration. She brusquely says: ‘It was the day Robert left us’. It is simple but effective. On hearing this, the audience’s disbelief begins to change to understanding. Storytelling is communal. Their method of telling a story is based on the information shared and known among a certain group of people. The structure of the play and the role of Millie as narrator are closely linked. Carr took into consideration that the audience should have an opportunity to acquire first hand information about the relationship between The Mai and Robert. As I mentioned before, Millie was the first witness of The Mai’s suffering. Now she speaks for her. Carr’s theatre brings the audience into a court of judgment. The audience take on the status of judge, jury and witness. The official court rules of keeping such figures away from the people directly involved does not apply here. When Millie begins her story of The Mai everyone gets intertwined. It becomes an issue for the community.

Diverse Female Voices

The female voices are the nucleus of this family drama, making a clear contrast against the silence framing the play. If The Mai is considered a patchwork quilt, the primary thread is the narration of Millie. The play reveals that various hues are added by every member of her family and also by her husband, the only male in this play. In between, diverse types of dialogue are patched together. The repeated motif deals with the roles and restrictions of women. Every piece reflects the other and makes up a whole design: a family history.

As Anthony Roche summarizes, “contemporary Irish drama has all too often been an exclusive men’s club” (Contemporary Irish Drama 147). Marina Carr challenges such a tradition in Irish theatre. She stages seven women of four generations: Grandma Fraochlán, The Mai’s 100-year-old grandmother; her two aunts, Julie and Agnes; The Mai and her two sisters, Connie and Beck; and her daughter, Millie. The stage of Friel’s Lughnasa is located in the kitchen, which has been symbolized as a women’s place in Irish theatre, and the Mundy sisters have to work making bread or knitting while they are talking. But here in The Mai, women gather in The Mai’s living room with a great window opening on to the lake, as her guests. Comfortably hosted by The Mai, they enjoy women’s talk while drinking. The stage becomes a forum for women. This feature is reminiscent of a television programme, for example, The Late Late Show, where many issues, such as female sexuality, menopause, the possibility of divorce, a husband’s love affair, are dealt with in informal conversation. The Mai can be seen as a female-hosted version of this popular and influential chat show, where every woman has time to talk or tell her own story. This format gives an entertainment quality to this play, so that audience can relax and enjoy their talk, but also it gives an opportunity for them to consider the issues discussed on stage as their own concerns².

The atmosphere of these scenes in the play is casual, but also has some festivity. The gathering in Act One is a kind of combined celebration of The Mai’s new house and Grandma Fraochlán’s centennial birthday. Act Two, one year later, begins with another gathering for The Mai’s birthday, and closes with the same year’s Christmas Day. However, Act Two shows us that the relationship between The Mai and Robert is on a downward slope, primarily because Robert has an affair with a local woman. The miseries of The Mai are more poignantly disclosed
in the context of such special occasions.

Grandma Fraochlán is the spirit of festival glee and deviation from the usual routine of everyday life. She transcends, in a way, the restrictions which have been imposed upon ordinary women. She describes herself as "a useless mother", and repeatedly tells stories about her beloved dead husband, Tomás or the five-fingered fisherman, as "greaí love stories" (Mai 69). Her love and affection for him showered on her last daughter Ellen, the mother of The Mai, is considered excessive and unbalanced. Julie, her eldest daughter is seventy-five years old but still bears a grudge against her mother, epitomised in her retort: "You didn't bring me up at all. I brought myself up and all the others. You were at the window pinin' for the nine-fingered fisherman!" (37). However, she was also suffering from her state as "tha on'y bastard an Fraochlán [Ise] in livin' memory an' tha stigma must've bin terrible for her [her mother]" (60). This is her own justification against her having forced Ellen to marry when it was revealed she was pregnant. Grandma Fraochlán or her mother, who insisted on calling herself the Duchess, fabricated the man who was the father of Grandma Fraochlán. Her protest, "Me greah grandfather was Tunisian! I'm on'y quarter Tunisian, half Moroccan an' half Spanish!" was ridiculed and dismissed by Julie: "That makes five quarters! How many quarters in a whole?" (37).

Here we can see mesmerizing attraction and danger in Grandma Fraochlán's person and her storytelling. It is useful to quote Angela Bourke: "Some legends recount events that are merely odd, while others are downright preposterous, yet it is difficult to say when the boundary from reported fact to inventive fiction is crossed. It is partly in this ability to reconcile the impossible with the unexceptional that the legend-teller's skill lies" (Virtual Reality 11). Storytelling is Grandma Fraochlán's way of life, in which it is quite difficult to distinguish between the reality and the fantasy, sometimes even for the narrator herself.

Clare Wallace takes notice of Grandma Fraochlán's name and considers it "the master key to the family's intricate and unfortunate history of (self)deception" (441). Then, why could some of her daughters and granddaughters survive, while Ellen and The Mai couldn't? We can find a clue in Julie's story. She blames Grandma Fraochlán on Ellen's death:

JULIE. [...] she filled the girl's head with all sorts of impossible hope, always talkin' about the time she was in college, and how brilliant she was, and maybe in a few years she'd go back and study. And it only filled Ellen with more longing and made her feel that what she had lost was all the greater. And do you know the worst, the worst of it all, Ellen adored her and looked up to her and believed everything she said, and that's what killed her, not childbirth, no, her spirit was broken. (40)

One thing to note is that Ellen lacked the critical ability to judge what she heard from Grandma. Another possibility to be emphasized is that Grandma Fraochlán probably applied her storytelling technique and skills in a manipulative fashion. Storytellers have many kinds of repertoires, and they manipulate their narrative technique according to each genre. Angela Bourke notes the dissimilarity between fairy tales and legend. According to her, while fairy tales "concern themselves with an escapist, fictional world of wonders and magic" (Reading 585), legends "deal with the actions of real people in real places and real time" (Reading 569). It is likely that Grandma Fraochlán told stories in which Ellen was described like a princess who could get and do anything. There is no doubt that Grandma Fraochlán talked such stories placing Ellen in real places and real time, as Julie tells us, 'in a few years she'd go back and study'. Here she made a grave mistake, and this is one of the factors that fatally damaged Ellen, and eventually The Mai.

Encouraging somebody to be ambitious does not always lead to disaster. However, we have to look at the social and legislative oppression imposed upon women at that time. As Melissa Sihra notes, "For Carr the family is central to the drama and it is from this microcosm that implications for culture and nation are cited" (257). Carr allots each female character with a probable position and fate according to each personality and social circumstances. It is noteworthy that Grandma Fraochlán gives us the exact years of Ellen's pregnancy: "Oh Lord,
nineteen years a age, she had ta marry him, whah else could she do, ih was nineteen-thirty-eight” (19). It was one year after the enactment of the Constitution of De Valera’s government. Dympna McLoughlin notes: “The single life pattern for women, of marriage, husband and children was only becoming widespread in the 1880s and was ultimately to reach its fullest expression in the newly independent Ireland and most especially in the 1937 Constitution. Here many roles had been pared away totally, and women received only partial recognition, not as citizens but as mothers. [...]” (86).

Ellen, doing Medicine in Dublin university, but pregnant “halfway through her college degree” (19), had no choice but to get married, to cover up “tha scandal” in Grandma Fraochlán’s term (60). It is more poignant that Ellen did not want to marry the man who begot her child. Julie discloses an episode that Ellen came to her house a few nights before her marriage and asked her to persuade Grandma Fraochlán that “she didn’t have to marry him” (36). When Grandma Fraochlán asks her why she did not do that, Julie retorts, “If it was now I’d mow ya down!” (36). Julie’s statement shows that she would not forced Ellen to marry “now”. Julie, joined with her sister Agnes, are humorously described by Millie, as “bastions of the Connemara click” who march to The Mai’s house to prevent Beck’s divorce, “armed with novenas, scapulars and leaflets on the horrors of premarital sex [...]” (32). They are far from liberal thinkers, but they can show understanding, when a dear member of their family concerns. If that happened now, Julie would support her. She could not stop her mother’s decision at that time, because she knew Ellen’s suffering would have been greater had she not got married.

The damage effected Ellen’s husband. He is never mentioned anywhere in the play. He is totally anonymous. He is described, in Julie’s story, as “that innocent” (40). Known as “He”, as Julie’s story goes, “wasn’t Ellen’s steam at all and he only married her because Grandma Fraochlán saw he did” (40). His status is reminiscent of “a purchased husband’, a ‘mean fellow’, as Dympna McLoughlin notes in the nineteenth century context, that is “the man who took a pregnant bride (even if he was the father of the child)” (85). McLoughlin states thus: “Generally these men were believed to demean themselves by voluntarily participating in the woman’s disgrace and therefore judged as just as morally corrupt” (85). Grandma Fraochlán, instead inflicting the blame on her doted daughter Ellen, accused the man. She calls him just “a brickie” (19), or a bricklayer. This explains his long absence from home. He must have been working in Britain, as a worker in the construction sites, one of the most common jobs for Irishmen at that time. Their married life from 1938-1946 was the time when the vast number, especially from the agricultural countryside, began to emigrate to Britain. Ellen’s husband came back every summer, but their marriage depended economically on his absence, during which Ellen and her children were confined in ‘home’. When the marriage bar became effective with the Local Government Act of 1941, there was no possibility for married women to get a proper job in the public sphere (cf. O’Callaghan 131). Grandma Fraochlán’s stories were based on total fantasy. No future other than that of a mother was available to Ellen. It is natural that her stories pained Ellen. Her dreams were totally shattered when she was pregnant and had a husband.

Towards the closing of the play, when Beck is alone with Grandma Fraochlán she says that she went to see her father in London, and reproaches her: “[...] he wasn’t the illiterate boor you’d have us all believe” (60). This episode can be read in two ways: all of Grandma Fraochlán’s stories are not true, or he has become “[a] pleasant, mild-mannered man” with two teenage daughters(60), since he escaped from that marriage because of Ellen’s death. Carr’s play touches on the dangerous possibilities that such a marriage could kill either the life or the personality of the woman and man concerned.

Both Connie and Beck heard stories by Grandma Fraochlán, and admit that each used to have her own prince. Although Connie was not wholly satisfied with her married life, she could say, “I mean our lives are far from fairytales, but, Christ, we’re not dead yet!” (54). The Mai, now facing her married life with Robert in crisis, thinks herself “trapped” (54) and accuses Grandma Fraochlán for “[s]he didn’t prepare us all” (55). Against Connie’s supportive comment, “She did her best”, The Mai tells them: “She filled us with hope — too much hope maybe — in things to come. And her stories made us long for something extraordinary to happen in our lives” (55). This is the same feeling that Julie found in Ellen. In Act One, The Mai works as principal for a local school. Compared to her mother, she has a wider space to show her ability. It is noteworthy that when The Mai has to admit their
marriage goes wrong, she repeatedly accuses Robert of allowing her to let go of the alternative future she might have had: “When you met me I was cellist in the college orchestra! I had a B.A. under my belt and I was half way through my Masters! You lower me, all the time you lower me” (49). There is a valid assumption that their marriage was also not planned but carried out as a swift measure resulted from the pregnancy of The Mai. When the marriage crumbles, the shattered dream comes back to her.

Beck hurts The Mai with “No point in actin’ the martyr” (44). Connie suggests, “Just get up and walk, or kick him out” (53). She tries to reason her sister: “You’re being very stubborn. You just won’t admit to yourself how terrible all this is” (53). Against them, The Mai persists: “But he’s still my husband [...] I have the children to think of” (53).

In The Mai’s dominantly female stage, Robert appears just like a guest member, and he is accused, by Grandma Fraochlán, as “It’s you who’s the visitor!” (65). The Mai is cared and loved by these women on her mother’s side, but Carr’s drama discloses poignantly and ironically that such affection is not enough for The Mai. Robert holds the key of life to The Mai, as she herself confesses to Millie towards the end, “[...] I can’t think of one reason for going on without him” (72).

Kieran Keohane, in his study of contemporary Irish music, considers, “Irish women’s culture has historically been a culture of abandonment, inspired by loss and destitution, a culture of being left behind minding the house” (281), and points out: “Abandoning the culture of abandonment is extremely difficult, for it is haunted by the fear that with the loss of a culture of abandonment an Irishwoman’s heart is left with an even more terrible emptiness” (284). The following argument helps to understand The Mai’s persistence with the roles of wife and husband: “[...] a contemporary generation of Irish women whose traditional roles as mothers and housewives are breaking down, and who find themselves confronted with a myriad of emerging roles that have not as yet developed traditions that make sustaining them bearable” (284).

To examine the relationship between The Mai and Robert would require another paper, but one observation should be made about this. Towards the end of the play, Carr inserts the story of how Grandma Fraochlán’s husband came to be called the nine-fingered fisherman. This is Grandma Fraochlán’s Christmas routine repertory, so everyone heard it many times. In The Mai’s family, this story has a special quality, as something that recognizes family solidarity, through sharing the legend.

What Grandma Fraochlán narrates reminds us of a Greek myth about Leander, who swam every night across the Hellespont to meet his lover Hero but eventually drowned one stormy night. In her story, her husband Tomáis was so anxious about his wife, who had trouble delivering their third baby, that he jumped from a fishing boat into the freezing sea to return to her. He survived but lost the little finger of his left hand from severe chilblains however he kept that finger. When the story became known, he showed it to many people who rowed the boats “because people never tire a greah love stories” (69).

This love story gives us a clue to The Mai’s revived anger against Robert when he never collected her “from the hospital when Stephen was born”, fourteen years before (66). This censure finishes their quarrel, raising some pity for her in Robert. It should be emphasized that this happened on Christmas Eve, and this episode is placed close to the story above. It follows that The Mai has a habit of comparing her married life with the legendary love stories told by Grandma Fraochlán. The splendour of her grandmother’s love stories just cause chagrin or dissatisfaction, as The Mai says: “You make our men seem like nothing” (38).

There is one final problematic feature to be considered. Grandma Fraochlán’s love stories with her husband hold a paradox. Grandma Fraochlán claims that she had “the most rare an’ sublime love” with her husband, and that she has been one of “them privileged few an’ I know a no higher love in this wort or tha next” (38). Her great love stories about their marriage tells what great lovers they were, but on the other, it reveals how absent they were in their household, as Julie notes: “[...] I hardly remember him though” (69). Repeatedly, Julie criticizes such a relationship, because she suffered most from their combined being of “a useless father” and “a useless mother” (69). A paradox is found in Grandma Fraochlán’s strong enmity against men, especially against men like Ellen’s husband and Robert, who left behind his wife and children. This must be rooted in her anger against her father
‘the Sultan of Spain’. However, she usually conceals these spiteful feelings under the colourful guise of her fanciful stories. Consider Grandma Fraochlán’s theory that there are two types of people that causes damage. In this theory, one puts their children first, and another “puts their lover first”, and she and her husband are in the second group (69-70). In either case, only love is recognized as the crucial thing. A more problematic feature is that she does not present any alternative way of life, especially when The Mai faces the crisis of marriage, and as Keohane notes, she is in a difficult time for any woman to imagine another future after the long dominant tradition that has imposed Irish women to be just the woman of the house.

All these things make it clear that The Mai had too much influence by the two kinds of stories of Grandma Fraochlán. She had to give up her dream to be more successful with the Master degree when she got married to Robert. Since then, she came to adhere to another dream that they would become lovers like those she heard in Grandma Fraochlán’s love stories. However, Robert cannot play that role for her, because ironically he is quite similar to the father of Grandma Fraochlán, the Sultan of Spain.

Declan Kiberd explains the two kind of storytellers in Ireland, ‘sgealai’ and ‘seanchai’, and the difference of their repertoires (157), and he points out that Synge was “far more interested in folk-tales and in the stories of seanchas” (159). Seanchas is the repertoire of the ‘seanchai’, and they “narrated his story as if he himself had witnessed it” (157). Their repertoire is “local tales, family genealogies and lore concerning places, fairies or ghosts” (157). Seanchas is considered equal to the ‘legend’ in the classification of Angela Bourke I mentioned before.

On the stage of The Mai, each member of The Mai’s family is a ‘seanchai’ who narrates her own version of the story regarding their family genealogies. Their narrative is in the tradition of storytelling of the legend or ‘seanchas’ that are narrated in the first person. The story about Ellen by Julie and Beck’s story about her father, as we noted, are one of ‘seanchas’. Their stories have more significance when we consider their purpose as “cautionary tales” (Narvaez 354) against the magical reality of those by Grandma Fraochlán. Millie learns her storytelling skill primarily from her great grandmother, but it seems Millie learns the critical attitude and true merits of legend from other younger members of her family, especially from Julie and Beck. What she aims for as a narrator is to make her family stories into a legend, a cautionary tale.

The main plot of The Mai is a very ordinary story about an ordinary woman who comes to realize that she cannot keep her husband at her home. In order to make the dimensions and depth of pain hidden in such an ordinary life understood, Marina Carr adopts the narrative of legend in the storytelling tradition. When Millie tells The Mai’s story beginning, ‘When I was eleven The Mai sent me into the butcher’s to buy a needle and thread’, the story of The Mai transforms into a legend. Angela Bourke observes: “In fairy-legend we find a sort of vernacular textbook of belonging: a way of teaching about the many boundaries that social life imposes, about the peril of transgressing them, and the necessity of revising them” (Burning 106). The Mai is a story of a woman who crosses the boundaries between life and death. Millie tells this story as The Mai’s life fusing into the legend of Owl Lake.

The closing scene of conversation between Millie and The Mai reveals not only their intimacy but also the unbridgeable gaps of understanding between them. Millie suggests to her mother that she should leave Robert or ask him to leave. She even suggests that she should have an affair. The Mai discloses the inmost secret experience of her affair, or “a one-night stand with a stranger passing through” (71). Millie shows a doubt at first, but never utters any accusing words. The Mai asks Millie: “Maybe he still loves me. What do you think, Millie?” and “Maybe it’s just a phase he’s going through and in a few years he’ll come back to me — What do you think, Millie?” (72). To these two inquiries, Millie repeats the same answer, “I don’t know” (72). Millie’s negation will be of great significance, because just a few speeches after this, the play closes with Millie watching “THE MAI looking out the window”, followed by “Sounds of geese and swans taking flight, sounds of water”, suggestive of The Mai’s wading into the water, and closes with silence (72).

The last narration of Millie, preceding the scene above, tells her recurring nightmares of water in the present
tense. She thinks she wears “Owl Lake like a caul around my chest to protect me from all that is good and hopeful and worth pursuing” (71). A caul or a lucky cap of a newborn child is, in the folk beliefs, for protecting people from drowning. But Millie’s caul is Owl Lake itself. The caul protects her from drowning, but it “constricts” her and she is forced to return to Owl Lake again and again (71).

MILLIE. Images rush past me from that childhood landscape. [...] There’s The Mai again, adding up the bills, a pencil in her mouth, Robert making his cello sing, The Mai at the window, Grandma Fraochlán’s oar, Julie and Agnes collar and in the corner, The Mai at the window again. The Mai at the window again. And it goes on and on till I succumb and linger among them there in that dead silent world that tore our hearts out for a song. (71)

The recurring images of Owl Lake refuse to be confined to the past. This tendency proves its being as “liminal zones”, as Peter Narváez explains in his study of legend, and presents “the ever-present possibility of magico-religious danger and tragedy” (353).

Now we come to understand the true meaning of Millie’s first narrated story. Its strange combination of the thread and the butcher’s with a strong visual suggestion comes to reveal its full meaning here. It voices, in the narrative of legend, The Mai’s unarticulated wish that her ragged heart should be sewn together, and also it sadly foretells that her wish cannot be realized.

The Mai’s heart-piercing wish is a needle penetrating through this play, and Millie sews it together as her own heart’s song. Her song turns her mother’s story into a legend and a keen, which surely invites us to re-consider and question the boundaries imposed upon her.

Notes

My special thanks to Orla O’Dea for reading the draft and making a number of helpful suggestions.
2 For detailed arguments on it, see Mika Funahashi, “The Female Voice on Stage: Marina Carr’s The Mai and By the Bog of Cats,” Eire (Japan Ireland Society) 21 (2001): esp. 45-49.
3 Brick-laying is parodied as a symbolic job for men, in contrast with knitting for women, in Carr’s Low in the Dark.
4 There were estimated 187,000 emigrants from 1936 to 1946 and the number increased through 1961 (Terence Brown 210).
5 Declan Kiberd discusses that Synge learned, from Anatole Le Braz, a Breton folklorist, “a classic distinction between the two types of folk narrative”: the ‘conte’ and the ‘légende’ (157).
6 Cf. Joyce Underwood Munro’s analysis of the features of the changeling narrative as a traditional model of the child who fails to thrive. Munro discusses: “The changeling embodies the idea of the failure of the parent-infant bond and the physical consequences that flow from that failure. By embodying what is not seen, that unknown which is therefore the invisible, the changeling renders it visible. This visibility allows one “to see and to say” [Michel Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1975) xli], therefore to articulate what was formerly beyond the reach of language” (252).

Works Cited


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