"This is not about love, this is about guilt and terror": ***Phaedra Backwards*** **(2011) and forwards by Marina Carr**

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Marina Carr’s relationship with the Greeks has been acknowledged in her Midlands tragedies and *Ariel* (2002). However*, Phaedra Backwards* (2011), one of her latest versions of a Greek myth, has not received the critical attention it deserves yet. This analysis aims to view Carr’s play as an example of an adaptation that constitutes a valuable contribution to the corpus of Irish versions of Greek tragedies; the discussion also intends to answer the question of to what an extent Carr is close or departs from the classical myth and what are the implications of this for the main protagonist. Whether the play is a feminist adaptation of Euripides, in terms of the major themes it represents –the representation of women, their agency and search for identity– and the transformation of mythological figures such as the Minotaur are other questions that will be addressed. A revision of Phaedra’s previous stories, from Euripides to contemporary accounts, unveils the new meanings acquired as the myth travels in time and confirms that *Phaedra Backwards* is a revision of the classical myth where the changes of time constitute the spaces for adaptation in which the background stories reconstruct and announce the future of the myth.

Keywords: Marina Carr; Euripides; Phaedra; Irish theatre; Greek tragedy; myth

(1) Marina Carr and the Greeks

Marina Carr is one of the most relevant playwrights in contemporary Ireland; she has been acknowledged as “the most significant and successful female Irish playwright since Lady Gregory […] [whose] powerfully original plays have changed the ways women have been and will be represented in Irish drama.”[1] Her close relationship with Greek tragedy has made scholarship refer to her as “a classicist who is entranced by the power of Greek mythology.”[2] Carr has been included as a major representative in the latest works concerning the relationship between Irish contemporary theatre and Greek classical tragedies.

In *Amid Our Troubles* (2002) Eamonn Jordan makes reference to the ability of Carr to adapt the myths, and he argues that she unmasks the myths in *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998) and *On Raftery's Hill* (2000), her early plays. Jordan identifies Carr's representation of the complexities of Irish society, disturbing the audiences through her attempt to bring back myth, which causes a "formidable intensity of encounter and disjunction."[3] The moments of engagement with the myth are in the shared themes that can be seen, for instance, in the similarities of the plots of her Midlands Tragedies, i.e. *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998), with the myths of Electra, Antigone or Medea. Instances of disjunction would encompass Carr's reconstruction of modern female mythological characters which differ from their classical counterparts in so far as they are monstrously courageous, and moved mainly by their thirst of vengeance and an anxiety to reveal the true history of their (current) lives –while the Greek heroines would have had their moments of strength to fight authority, but always preserving modesty, chastity and their duties as devoted mothers and wives related to the relevance of reputation. Drawing to Steiner's discussion of Jung's ideas, –on the mystical figures and their persistence in time as collective archetypes that survive in art–, Jordan establishes a relationship with Carr's adaptations where the characters cannot escape the influence of the dramatic action marked by the playwright, which implies their existence in a dramatic world "where emotions are utterly intense and scary, yet driven by a detailed, impulsive obligation to establish strong connections between cause and effect, where things are named for what they are."[4] Carr's use of myth is very much linked to her representation of women in Ireland, their search for identity and agency within the familial and social context. Myth revives in the contemporary setting to become a foreseer of impending catastrophes that happen, most often, to women.

By 2005, this interest in the situation of women is a shared one, and the echoes of classical Greek theatre in Ireland are identified with a tendency to rewrite the tragedies that stressed gender issues and analyse how female heroines had been depicted in the original classical narratives, and transformed by contemporary playwrights. In *Rebel Women* the theatre of Carr is addressed from this perspective, and she is now labelled as the dissenting voice "within the impressive lineage of Irish playwrights who are drawn to ancient Greek drama."[5] Melissa Sihra, an acknowledged scholar in the theatre of Carr, identifies in her plays a connection between the Athens of the 5th century BC and the Ireland of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century. Sihra sees Carr's use of myth as a possibility to open new spaces for imagination and transformation, especially for Irish women who, as it happened in the Greek society, have been long relegated to the domestic space. She identifies the main causes for this demotion in the article 41 of the Irish Constitution of 1937, which, indeed, confined women to their homes:

> 2. 1º In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
> 2º The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.[6]

This is relevant to Carr's plays, since many of her women protagonists challenge these conceptions of devoted mothers and wives and reject the roles. In this sense, her Phaedra can be connected with other Carr's notable female characters, such as Mai (*The Mai*), Hester (*By the Bog of Cats…*), Portia (*Portia Coughlan*), Frances (*Ariel*), Woman (*Woman and Scarecrow*) or Catherine (*Marble*).

Women in Ireland have also been used to represent their country, becoming cultural representations, especially at moments of social and political upheaval. This affected their status, they became objects at the service of the community and,

consequently, lost agency. This idea has been studied, amongst others, by Spanish scholar Aída Rosende Pérez, who revised the feminine iconography of Ireland as a mother and concluded that it had generated a model of Irish woman as a martyr who willingly sacrificed for her nation and children. Therefore, Irish women found themselves trapped in "roles reduccionistas y opresores."[7] This has influenced Carr's depiction of brave women who defy stereotypical images and who do not accommodate but "continually renegotiate boundaries of place, authority and identity."[8] There is a subsequent lack of conformism in her characters which has been confirmed by Eamonn Jordan (2010), when he retakes Carr's appropriation of Greek myths and reaches some useful conclusions in *Dissident Dramaturgies*. First, Carr is able to put the spectator in a space that is outside social norms, and her theatre offers "moments of pure savagery and beauty, while still creating convincing dramas that are replete with intricate, maimed, destructive, wayward and marginal characters who are full of unrealizable longing."[9] Secondly, the Greek influences are blatant in Carr's Midlands Tragedies, where women protagonists live in chaos and self-destruction reigns. Irish Contemporary heroines are moved by a feeling of revenge, named by Jordan "the revenge of the dispossessed,"[10] making reference, once more, to the situation of women in Ireland, and have been damaged so badly that they replicate the violence and are "alert to their own capacity to violate, hurt and inspire chaos and dread."[11] As a result, "the human in part becomes animal, and the animal becomes human,"[12] as we will see, for instance, in the character of the Minotaur in *Phaedra Backwards* (2011).

Following Jordan and Sihra's interest in Irish playwrights and the Greeks, Brian Arkins publishes *Irish Appropriation,* where he notices the shift that was produced in the rewriting of tragedy from major European locations to what he calls "peripheral regions,"[13] such as Ireland. He claims the existence of Irish tragedies and mentions Teresa

Deevy and Marina Carr as women writers who represent this tendency; he establishes again a relationship between Ireland and Greece and concludes that there has been much debate on certain social issues in both contexts. This can be exemplified in Ireland from the 1960s onwards, due to political and social issues that affected women's situation. In Arkins' words: "In this very volatile situation, Greek tragedy allows for the exploration of issues of nationalism, of gender, of resistance."[14]

Latest publications on the use of Greek tragedy in modern times reconceptualise its use by contemporary playwrights. In *Greek Fragments* (2017), Eleftheria Ioannidou explores Greek tragedy as a canon, which has been studied both from a philological perspective, that favoured the analysis of the classical text, and from a more conceptual framework, within which the meanings of the term are readdressed. She concludes that modern rewritings both reaffirm and challenge tragedy as a canon and the postmodern world, with its "deconstructed narratives, proliferating images, and textual pastiche,"[15] has inevitably exerted an influence on the rewriting process. She identifies the function of tragedy in the modern settings as both "a dramatic form that ascribes shape and meaning to human suffering [and] […] also a discursive frame used to determine whose suffering is meaningful,"[16] a concept that matches Carr's focus on the character of Phaedra as well as her reconceptualization of the feelings that moved her –guilt and terror instead of love.

Carr's plays based on Greek tragedies, especially on Euripides,[17] have received much critical attention. However, *Phaedra Backwards* is not as famous as other pieces of her theatre and has not been studied as it deserves yet. The literature on Marina Carr has increased considerably during the twenty-first century and three volumes have been published about her theatre. In 2003 *The Theatre of Marina Carr* focuses on the Midlands Tragedies. Authors such as Anthony Roche, Clare Wallace or Frank McGuinness reflect

on the women protagonists of this trilogy and their mythological connections, to conclude that Carr has a true love for the Greeks. In *Bloody Living* (2010) Rhona Trench addresses Carr's theatre as a representation of the concept of self-destruction in women, following the idea of abjection taken from Julia Kristeva. The self-destructive nature of the characters is encouraged by the limitations or borders that surround them and that "come to reveal a disruption to the margins of their identity, a disruption that places subjectivity continuously on the verge of collapse."[18] Thus, within those spaces, women refuse to accommodate and prefer to dissent in search for their identity. The volume addressed this theme in the Midlands Tragedies, but also in Carr's first plays, *Ullaloo* (1991) and *Low in the Dark* (1989) as well as in her plays until 2009, which would include *On Raftery's Hill* (2000), *Ariel* (2002), *Meat and Salt* (2003), *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) and *Marble* (2009).

The latest volume on the theatre of Carr has just been published. Written by Melissa Sihra, *Pastures of the Unknown* (2019) situates Carr as part of an Irish matriarchal genealogy of women playwrights initiated by Lady Gregory. For Sihra, both dramatists share their vision of Irish folklore, as well as an interest to depict strong women as protagonists of their plays and the mix of the natural and the supernatural. Sihra includes one of the very few analyses on *Phaedra Backwards* existing so far, where she identifies the Minotaur as a mystical creature that embodies eternity, mystery and the imagination, and through which Carr would be challenging "the patriarchal foundations of Greek theatre."[19] In addition, Sihra notices how Carr rewrites the personality of Phaedra to make it more complex and departs from the Euripidean counterpart in the main plot –for instance, in the reverse of the sexual desire, since it will be Hippolytus now the one who is now madly in love with Phaedra.

2. Phaedra Backwards

> **Phaedra** You misunderstand me. You misunderstand everything. This is not about love, this is about guilt and terror, my two trusty knights who'll see me to my lonely grave.[20]

Contemporary readings of the myth acknowledge that "the tragedy of Phaedra seems […] to lie on the thin edge between the 'guilt' of having nurtured such an unutterable feeling and the 'guilt' of having allowed it to be revealed and to have its own course."[21] Marina Carr seems to agree with this vision and her adaptation focuses on the exploration of these feelings which ultimately cause Phaedra's death in *Phaedra Backwards*. Carr departs from Euripides substantially and this can be seen in her depiction of the overarching themes, such as the representation of women, their agency and search for identity, as well as the reconfiguration of the mythological figure of the Minotaur.

Phaedra Backwards is the latest Irish version of this myth in Ireland. Carr is following other Irish writers who revised the story before her such as *Racine's Phaedra*, by Derek Mahon (1996), *The Oval Machine*, by Ulick O'Connor (1986), *Living Quarters, after Hippolytus*, by Brian Friel (1977) or *The Gentle Island*, also by Friel (1971). Of special interest for this article is Friel's *Living Quarters*, which contains "the idea of a process of 'dreaming back,' […] of retracking one's way through one's past in an effort to discover some moment of choice, some hidden motive, some now-forgotten impulse to action that might explain how one's course became directed towards the tragedy and guilt."[22] Friel focusses on the relationship between father and son and his characters are "imprisoned forever in a role that leaves little room for freedom and individual creativity."[23] This fight between freedom and determinism will be affected by the unbearable weight of the past/myth. Friel creates memories onstage that evoke other memories, and this strategy, together with the presence of imprisoned characters, is useful

to introduce Carr's play, where she "returns to Greek myth with its labyrinth of generational legacy and damaging desire."[24]

The plot of *Phaedra Backwards* goes beyond a woman who falls in love with a younger man. It reimagines the myth as the story of a woman who has gained agency and, through the memories of her past, reconstructs her present and an performs an attempt to control her future. To achieve this backwards and forwards fluidity the play starts where previous accounts had ended, and with Phaedra as the protagonist. After hearing about Hippolytus' death, Phaedra, in an attempt to reconstruct her identity, remembers the difficult moments she spent with her brother, the Minotaur, and with her husband, Theseus, and how these marked her life. Moreover, she unveils Hippolytus' violent attitude towards her, and reveals her deep love for her husband, as some of the causes that triggered her tragedy. Through her memories, made visible in the play in by the use of images projected on a screen, she also recalls the stories of Pasiphae and Ariadne, to depict an image of her family that had not been previously exposed on stage. The representation of women in this play becomes more remarkable and they are characters who speak clearly about what they want –for instance in terms of sexual desire– and what they do not want –such as being subject to their familial obligations as mothers or wives.

With this same intention of contributing to the reconstruction of the identity of Phaedra, Carr places her in the title of the play, followed by *Backwards*, both to encapsulate the rhythm of the story and to empower her as the protagonist. In addition, she reorders the list of characters, situating Phaedra in the first position and describing all the others, supporting roles now, according to their relationship with *her*. It is also significant that she eliminates her description as wife and mother, present in the original version, and that the number of feminine characters has been increased, adding Aricia,

the Girl, Pasiphae, Ariadne and the Nanny, to create another example of Carr's women genealogies.

The play is based on the Greek myth, but situated in modern times. It is not located in Ireland, although some instances of the Irish vernacular can be identified. It differs in this sense from Carr's previous revisions of Greek tragedies, since she intended to achieve something different this time:

> I wanted a timeless quality to *Phaedra Backwards*. It seemed to me that nothing was to be gained by nailing it down timewise or geographically. The myth has a timelessness about it and I was trying to respond to that in the truest way I knew.[25]

To accomplish this sense of immutability, Carr chooses as a context a space that is eternal, enchanted, as indicated in the initial opening stage direction, that confers the idea that the story can happen –or could have happened– anywhere at any time, or, indeed, that things were like this always, only they were told differently:

> A terrace. A stone terrace. A stone floor.
> The bay and the mountains surround this terrace.
> The ever-changing light.
> The sound of the sea a constant score.
> Two other scores inhabit the place.
> Phaedra's score and the Minotaur's.
> A formerly good dining table, now a battered vestige
> Of itself.
> Destroyed chairs. A lonely chaise longue.
> The light is magical, from some dark fairy tale.
> Time. Now and then. Then and now. Always.[26]

The visual plays an important role in the new setting, and a screen is used as a prop to tell the back stories of some of the characters and start the adaptation process: in the video projected as the background of the stage the audience can watch the children

Minotaur, Phaedra and Ariadne depicted as "laughing, intoxicating children engrossed in some elaborate game." [27]This is repeated several times during the performance and creates an effect of endlessness and circularity for the story. To reconstruct the past of the characters Carr includes their childhood in images to explain, for instance, the unknown nature of the Minotaur, depicted now as "in great distress." [28]

These images help follow the changes of time in the new context, from the past to the present and future, motivated by the playwright's feeling that only one side of the story had been told:

> I wanted to tell the back story of Phaedra's family: her mother, Pasiphae; her father, Minos; her brother, the Minotaur; her sister, Ariadne. I began to think about what that relationship might have been and how they lead to the death of Hippolytus.[29]

Thus, the characters travel backwards and forwards to rewrite the myth in their search for identity. And we find characters from the past, those who live in the present and those who move between the past and the present –being these positionings not arbitrary and signalling meanings related to the possibility or not of their existence in the new context. From the past, we have those who died and visit the world of the living, i.e. Pasiphae, Minos and Ariadne. Pasiphae is now a woman obsessed with the White Bull and unashamed of her sexual desire: "What did you expect when you bring a force like that into our fields?"[30] In addition, she refuses to be a Penelope waiting eternally for an errant husband: "Just what did you expect? Embroidery? Well, this is what I stitched together while you were away. "[31] Absent in Euripides, except for a brief reference to her tortuous past, she has gained presence and agency in Carr and her story with the white bull is reconstructed as a supernatural encounter which marked her life for good. In fact, she is described as a bull-fancier and asks the Inventor –a servant who follows her orders, a new character from the future to intervene the past– to build the suit of a cow to seduce

her animal lover. She is a good example of Carr's representation of women in the sense that she equals the ability to fulfil all one's desires to being human. She is essential in redefining the mythological figure of the Minotaur, traditionally a beast, now seen by her as "an enchanted thing who swam in to drive me mad"[32] but whose "nature is good, passionate, gentle, infinitely suffering."[33] Pasiphae prefers him to the human lot. Moreover, she redefines motherhood, also a key motif in Carr's theatre, questions her role as a wife, which undermines her independence and freedom, and does not feel obedience towards her husband. Minos has become a sort of Odysseus who, after being away for years, hardly recognises his daughters anymore. Jealous and aware of his wife's infidelity he is a misogynist and abuser who mistreats the Minotaur and who, thus, justifies his wife's behaviour and evolution.

Ariadne has also changed: she is a strong woman who reclaims her right to take revenge on Phaedra and reproaches her for having stolen her husband. In addition, she joins the Minotaur, Pasiphae and Minos in a disturbing scene where they arrange around Phaedra, who has been hanged, and start taking bites from her flesh. We do not have in Carr Hippolytus' death, caused by a huge bull arisen from a mass of water in previous versions, and told in gruesome terms; it has been substituted by the blood and roars from this scene which is preceded by the Minotaur's statement that: "We'll have what we need in the end,"[34] and Minos' "Why should you live when we don't? Why should you eat while we starve?"[35] which symbolise the opposition from other mythological figures to Phaedra's salvation through the representation of the cannibalistic appropriation of her essence.

The present of the play is inhabited by Phaedra, Theseus, Hippolytus and Aricia. When Theseus tries to blame her for the death of his son Phaedra is not ashamed or afraid of losing her reputation; quite the opposite, she responds arrogantly to rewrite the story

of her husband as a decrepit old man whose glorious past is over, and, by extension, to destroy the image of the classical patriarchal family which belongs to the past –*Last night*:

> You weren't standing up for me. You were ranting about yourself and your battered carcass. How the women don't look any more unless you buy them. You, who once had a cradle rocking in every town land. Last night was about your grey hair and his black. Last night was about that tremor in your hand. When did that tremor appear? Last week your back was straight. Now it's curved like an old seal. Last night was about you in a white rage, looking for any excuse to rip through your son. Well, he went over the cliff. You've won again and now I'll have another glass of champagne. Go and cry in some other room. [36]

Phaedra is also straightforward as regards feelings and, quoting her own mother, talks about sexual desire rather than romantic love: "You bring something beautiful into my house and expect me just to look" [37] or "I want to sleep with your son."[38] This is also explicit through her declaration that "I'll touch what I need to touch. I have always and I always will,"[39] suggesting that this has always been the real Phaedra, things were like this always, only told differently. Phaedra prefers those people who have suffered, "those with the scars and still standing,"[40] and her encounters with Aricia are moments where she takes the chance to defend her personality and individuality which do not abide by social rules. In addition, she is proud of her difference, rejects judgements and claims her right to have an existence of her own, far from the immutability imposed by the myth: "I refuse your verdict on me. I refuse this life, this non-existence by the shore. I'm not a mermaid."[41]As the other women in the play, she contributes to reconstruct the figure of the Minotaur, by unfolding his human side, and she is the one who tells how "he bled, he suffered, he loved,"[42] questioning traditional readings of him as the representation of evil and posing one of the key questions in the story: "Ever occur to you it's here is all wrong? Not him!"[43]

The main difference of this Phaedra lies in her refusal to stay silent and on the edge of her life. She tries to find refuge in her memories and in nature –she would like to become an aspen– and, when this fails, she thinks of death as a departure that would put an end to the impossibility of finding a story where she fits or to find answers for her constant questions. Her deep disappointment, described as "a whittling to bone till everything you believed is gone,"[44] makes her reject the human in favour of the animal:

> And you're not an animal? And I'm not? And are we not surrounded by animals? You call the way you live human? This country human? The passions of the upright two-feeters human? We're animals. [45]

Her final walk into the water, led by the Minotaur, is ambiguous since it can mean her death, but also the entrance in a liminal or spiritual realm where she will find another possible existence.

Theseus also inhabits the present of the play, only to be harshly criticised in the new context where he represents an obstacle in the search for identity and self-determination of women. He is a conceited man, an enchanter, seducer of the young who boasts of having slept with three thousand and eleven women. Described as "an aging bull past his prime,"[46] he despises women. A similar negative depiction of the masculinity is embodied in the character of Hippolytus, now in love with Phaedra, but dating Aricia at the same time, questioning again the romantic love present in previous accounts. Hippolytus shows some interest in Phaedra but in so far as having her would imply a sort of prize for him. This is much influenced by his rivalry relationship with his father, which is well explained by the end of the play. Here, far from reconciliating, they end up unmasking their real thoughts about each other and, while for Theseus Hippolytus is a "runt, a nothing, a lout, a dreamer of crimes who is seedily immaculate, obscene in your pristine torpor,"[47] Hippolytus accuses him of plundering and rampaging. Theseus is not

finally redeemed, as it was in Euripides, but cursed by the Minotaur: "And when you recover the equilibrium, which won't be today or tomorrow. But when you think you have, wander down and absent-mindedly find yourself in the caves."[48]

Aricia is not any longer a naïve young lady in love with Hippolytus; she introduces the advantages of technological advances, speaks of her future as a leading businesswoman, and rejects love. She has become in modern times a sophisticated, self-confident and cold-hearted woman who deconstructs the classical idealised image of nature as a refuge:

> I've always hated trees. Someday I will run a concrete empire and there will not be a tree for a thousand miles. I know we need them for air and all of that but technology is marvellous. Someday we'll have moved beyond air and the only place you'll see an aspen will be born in some Eastern European museum, an illegal exhibit in the freak section. And they'll marvel how we could live alongside such monsters without fainting with terror. That's my wish for the future. Steel and stone."[49]

Moving constantly between past and present, as if trying desperately to find a space and a time to settle, is the mythological figure of the Minotaur. Absent in Euripides, he belongs here "to the pastures of the unknown,"[50] and Carr uses Picasso's drawings on him as a background to emphasise his mutability. He, an ox-faced mutant, an "evil growth from some horrific urn,"[51] travels backwards and forwards in the play to explain his nature, how he was removed from the love of his family, from Pasiphae's protection, and became a despised and abused creature, referred to as a thing, and forced to live in caves. Her mother explains her relationship with the white bull as an incursion into the imaginable, a transitional space from where she returned with the Minotaur. Thus, the supernatural has been made flesh in him and his reconceptualization is caused by the intention of Carr to use him as the personification of "the imagination itself –a visceral embodiment of intrinsic otherness […] who cannot be reduced to the literal and thus poses

the greatest challenge to logic and authority."[52] This spirituality and difference is also embodied in his ability to travel between the worlds of the living and the dead, as well as in his role as the one who carries Phaedra into another existence by the end of the play – in the final scene the image on the screen is that of the Minotaur carrying Phaedra into the sea from where she is not returning.

He becomes the main voice to answer to all those who traditionally spoke of him as the impersonation of the savage, and defends one side of his blended nature, the animal side, as Phaedra does. He possesses, in his own words "all the nobility of the white bull. But unfortunately, too in my mix, the shadow faculties of your race."[53] Therefore, he implies a twist on the original Euripidean text and its previous interpretations: while his death has traditionally been understood as a metaphor for the end of the outrageous, and the triumph of the human, now the half animal is perceived as a victim of the violent patriarchal system –metaphored in the mistreatment he suffered from Theseus. This idea has recently been confirmed by Sihra when she states that the traditional patriarchal visions of the Minotaur, as the representation of barbarism being killed by Theseus, embodiment of Western civilisation, is changed by Carr, for whom "the Minotaur signifies enlightenment, resituating patriarchy as the savage beast."[54] There is a shift then and Theseus becomes the savage animal while the Minotaur is "goodness and light."[55]

Going backwards in the story of Phaedra and revisiting other accounts, from Euripides to contemporary times, allows to confirm the difference of Carr's Phaedra as well as to understand the evolution of the character.

3. Phaedra backwards

Contemporary studies on the reception of classical Phaedra (Lauriola 2015) situate the first mention of the character in *The Odyssey* by Homer. When Odysseus in Book XI sees a crowd of ghosts and "there appeared a whole company of women […]

and these were the wives or the daughters of great men."[56] Amongst these, Odysseus says "I saw Phaedra."[57] After this introduction, where Phaedra is defined in terms of her relationship with a great man, Euripides was the first who wrote her full story in *Hippolytus* creating "the matrix of subsequent *Phaedra(s)*."[58] She appears as a married woman who falls in love with a younger boy. As regards her genealogy, Phaedra is the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae; she has a sister, Ariadne, and a brother, Deucalion. After given in marriage to Theseus, she has two children and falls in love with her stepson, who rejects her –Hippolytus is a chaste and devoted son who would never betray his father. Moved by fear of her husband's reaction, she falsely accuses Hippolytus of rape causing his death. Mad in despair, and overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, she kills herself as a sacrifice to redeem the sins committed.

Despite the fact that it might seem that Euripides does not leave much space for the agency of women in his play, he is seen today as a "pacifist feminist."[59] This is related to the different versions for the story of Phaedra he wrote. In fact, the first character he depicted was a brave woman who remained alive after declaring openly her forbidden feelings for her stepson, and she is different from the Phaedra of the version that he revised later, which has survived, where the morals that surround the story affect and limit her behaviour. There are also backwards information in Euripides, but this serves to confirm the negative image of women: Hippolytus' rejection of Phaedra is linked to his own origin as son of a frivolous woman who was once queen of the Amazons, "the matrilineal race of warrior women who spurned 'normal' conjugal behaviours and roamed the virginal wild."[60] Women's attempts to gain freedom and presence when they use words to unmask the truth and achieve recognition –Euripidean women are remarkable as regards their skills for debating and discussing and Phaedra's dilemma is performed through rhetoric– are criticised and reveal the importance of patriarchy

"empowering men and reaffirming their authority by privileging the relationship between them and by displacing the female."[61] It should not be forgotten that women in classical tragedy –as it happened in Ireland– were used culturally to represent the Greek society – this can be exemplified through the fact that "women performed the laments at funerals, that Dionysus' cult involved maenadism and transvestism, and that women were perceived as more emotionally expressive and susceptible to Eros and possession."[62] Thus, Euripides tries to adapt his story to the Greek audience and her queen keeps her secret love quiet "to take the place that the current social conventions expected from women: that of silence and invisibility."[63] As a consequence, Phaedra is a suffering woman who behaves as expected and is extremely concerned about her reputation. Only when she ultimately chooses death as the only escapeway is she able to speak the unspeakable.

After Euripides, Ovid included Phaedra in his *Heroides* and the character stars becoming more independent, turning "into a self-aware woman, strongly determined to give way openly to her love, and even to sustain its legitimacy." [64] This Phaedra is closer to Carr's but also differentiates at some points: she does not speak here, she only writes. On the other side, she shows in her declaration of love a tone of revenge, but also a sense of transgression and determination that matches Carr's tone, and evokes the Irish Phaedra's preference for the animal: she gives up to the "sacred madness brought by half-divine dryads and fauns with horns."[65] In addition, she starts to depict a negative image of Theseus and Hippolytus of whom she says that have been: "the destruction of we two sisters,"[66] and uses the Minotaur to highlight her husband's evilness when she tells how he "crushed my brother's bones and scattered them over the soil,"[67] a reference to the mythological character that can be related to Carr's defence of his noble nature.

After this, Seneca focuses on Phaedra in his tragedy: he is the first one to entitle the play after her, and portrays a negative image of the stepmother, whose love for her stepson is blameworthy and incestuous: "Let's put is simply: cruel stepmothers succumb to Love."[68] If in Ovid Phaedra was able to write in the letter her true feelings, Seneca follows this same direction, and she can face Hippolytus and speak her true feelings. This might be related to the more open society where Seneca lived and where "it was not infrequent that 'noble women' would take the erotic initiative with men."[69] Seneca also goes backwards to explain that Phaedra has been married to the enemy and lives a life of tears and misery, which might justify her anxiety for a new love, and she identifies the evil she has inherited from her mother since "Adultery in the woods is a brand of love my family knows too well."[70] There is a search for identity in this Phaedra, and her anguish is caused by her inner conflict between reason and feeling, mind and desire. She refuses to be called mother and implores Hippolytus to become her lover: "Receive me, your suppliant and slave, into your protective arms and watch over me."[71] After being rejected, she will accuse him of rape, arising Theseus' anger and repudiation of his son, but, once she knows about his death, understands her wicked act and confesses: "I made up a false story, I lied about his wicked act […] You punished your son for nothing."[72] She will end up killing herself, with a sword, to restore Hippolytus' reputation, in an act that reveals once more her interior dilemma.

The character of Hippolytus also evolves, and he is here a misogynist who contributes to the negative representation of women:

> But the leaders of wickedness are women. These architects of crimes lay siege to our mind, and it is because of these creature's adulterous ways that so many cities lie smouldering in ashes, so many nations feel the sting of war, so many nations lie crushed beneath the ruins of their once mighty kingdoms.[73]

Phaedra's death acquires a different meaning which, in a way, is close to Carr; while in Euripides it could be understood as a way to redeem her sins and save her reputation, in Seneca the achievement of freedom is added to the now onstage ending "from furor, redemption of pudor, just punishment and, last but not least, a way to join the beloved."[74]

When asked about the initial inspiration for *Phaedra Backwards*, Marina Carr mentions Racine's as one of her previous readings. She loved the French version but "felt it only told one side of the story."[75] In Racine the representation of women has changed substantially: Phaedra is less hateful than in the classical instances and she is somehow exculpated: it will be the nurse who launches the false accusation to Hippolytus, Phaedra is a victim of the gods and she truly believes her husband is dead. Phaedra is first introduced by her nurse, Oenone, as "dying from a hidden malady."[76] The queen has become a weak woman who feels that her strength is abandoning her and is ashamed of her feelings. She remembers how love hurt both her mother and sister and confesses how she forced Hippolytus' exile not to see him. The story of Hippolytus and Aricia gains importance and there are scenes in the play devoted to their love affair, such as the moment where Hippolytus is finally able to confess his love, or when Aricia accepts him. This seems to be the main story and Phaedra an obstacle for it to reach a happy ending. When Racine's Phaedra finally tells Hippolytus about her feelings, to be repudiated by him, and hears that the king is still alive, she starts to change and enacts her revenge. Death is the end she chooses: "Then, death, come free me from so many woes,"[77] as it will restore the balance: "But death, robbing my eyes of light, will give back to the sun its tarnished purity."[78]

The twentieth century saw the rewriting of the myth of Phaedra by female playwrights, and so the closest versions to Carr's play, in which the overarching themes

of the representation of women, the search for identity and their agency become most relevant. In general terms, it is possible to discern two main plots "either with Phaedra as the victim of social conventions and even of persecutions, or with Phaedra as the victorious master of her own life."[79] Examples of this would be Marina Tsvetaeva's verse drama *Phaedra* (1927), where the protagonist is an innocent woman whose only sin is to fall in love with a young man, or Hilda Doolitle's verse-play, entitled *Hippolytus Temporizes*, where Phaedra is presented as a decision-maker: she tries to seduce Hippolytus and kills herself, not for being afraid of damaging her reputation, but because she cannot endure the pain due to Hippolytus' rejection. Within this same fashion, in 1963 Marguerite Yourcenar writes a satiric play, *Who Doesn't Have His Minotaure*, where Phaedra is a cruel woman whose personality is the result of her suffering for not being loved back by Hippolytus. In all the three cases similarities can be drawn with Carr's Phaedra, who can be seen both as a victim of her past and a powerful woman who chooses her future.

Phaedra´s Love (1996) by Sarah Kane offers a contemporary revision of the myth that focuses on the depiction of Phaedra as a victim, the result of the violent atmosphere that surrounds her. The British dramatist depicts her obsessed by love and abused by Hippolytus, now a darkest character in the form of a despicable man unable to control his sexual impulses. Phaedra´s love for Hippolytus is irrational, a sort of a curse that can be identified with the mythological past and their impossibility to escape this: "There's something between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be."[80] She is infatuated with the pain of Hippolytus and openly talks to him about her love. The family they share is more disrupted than in any of the previous versions and stories of adultery abound. In this version Phaedra hangs herself and leaves a note saying that Hippolytus raped her, which, far from causing his pain, arises his

impudence and exposes Phaedra's defeat: "She shouldn't have taken it so seriously."[81] The fact that Phaedra finds a refuge in suicide suggests the ambiguity of the play, which will also appear in Carr, that lies in the fact that the death of the character also evokes a renovation.

The year before Carr's first production of *Phaedra Backwards*, other Irish female playwrights presented in their version a woman who desperately wants to experience real love. Hilary Fannin and Ellen Cranitch, in *Phaedra* (2010), place the story in the present and the protagonist is a strong but also suffering woman who refuses to be just a mother or a wife and yearns for what Hippolytus represents for her: "Wild love, raw love, gut love, cursed love. Body-on-the-shore love. Mutilating, annihilating, God-sniggering, soul-blistering love."[82] This anxiety makes her a violent and coldhearted character who wants to kill Theseus and Hippolytus, when she learns he is in love with Aricia. Her determination and strong will causes her rejection by other women: she is described as an artic bitch or a rich whore. She departs from traditional representations of Irish women as caring mothers and considers her children as her artillery to fight for her rights in front of Theseus. She always knows the duress she has to live under, as does the Phaedra of Carr, and chokes when she cannot have the agency she desires. This complex search for identity sometimes translates in the play in moments where her speech is broken, as a metaphor of the impossibility to tell her own story.

The character of Theseus, as in *Phaedra Backwards*, is also rewritten in negative terms: the society where he lives now does not await for the arrival of the beloved king; in the modern context his death is celebrated:

> The prince of the plastic sash window, the gazebo king, the double-glazed duke is dead. The man who bathed in the gleet of a thousand cute whores, the man who sprayed the pesticide of castrated housing estates up and down the wet ditches of this

gormless fucking country, is dead, and they can barely contain their excitement in that fucking house.[83]

This Phaedra anticipates Carr's in that some of the characters, Hippolytus and Aricia, try to escape the myth "Rip out the marble […] scratch out or ghosts, live."[84] But they cannot. The ending for Phaedra is more hopeful here and, after the death of Hippolytus she remains alive announcing she will leave Theseus, so in a way she has achieved independence, despite the loss of love.

4. Conclusions: Phaedra backwards and forwards

Going backwards and forwards in the stories of Phaedra allows to unveil the changes the myth has gone through while it travels in time. Identifying some of its major themes, those related to the situation of women, their freedom and fight for identity, as well as the evolution of other characters that contributed to this, such as the Minotaur, Theseus or Hippolytus, has helped understand what makes *Phaedra Backwards* worth analysing. With this play Marina Carr continues disturbing the audience by rewriting the Greek myths, focusing in the moments where Phaedra reconstructs her past to understand her present and question her future. Although she decontextualizes her Phaedra, one cannot avoid seeing the new version as a claim of the right of (Irish) women to say what they think and do what they want, despite social limitations.

Euripides and Carr's plays share the main plot but they differ, first of all, in the morals that affected Phaedra: while in Euripides Phaedra's dilemma was mainly influenced by the patriarchal society and the need to preserve reputation, in Carr's her main preoccupation is her inability to live in a world where she does not belong or conform. Carr's Phaedra has the determination of Ovid's, the inner conflict of Seneca's and the anxiety for revenge of Racine's. In addition, Carr adapts to the new context of reception of the myth and Phaedra fights the social conventions and makes her own

decisions, as the Phaedras of the twentieth century did before her. In modern times, Phaedra continues feeling guilty: "Now I have to take the blame for everything myself,"[85] but she is a rebel woman, a dissenting voice who takes chances for the things she wants.

The weight of the myth is painful for and arises terror in her: "Where can I go? There is no place for me. I am forever cast out, forever watching others live while my lips rot with my song." [86] As a consequence, her dark side, in the form of her difference, appears: "I am what happens in caves."[87] The new Phaedra is not a wife or a mother, but a woman who loves triviality, has many lovers and refuses to stay in the margins. She wants a full life despite the fear this implies and willingly accepts death, not as a surrender, but as a departure from the pointlessness of the world of the living. Her final reunion with the dead can be read, not as her ending, but as her choice of the supernatural over the world of the living where she (the myth) continues unable to find an identity. Her last words confirm her intention to follow her own way and also to return –as all myths do: "The time for eating daffodils is past. The distance travelled from myself too great. I'll go on my own steam. I won't be long." [88]

Carr's play is both an example of a valuable revision of the myth of Phaedra within the corpus of its reception in contemporary times and it correspondingly adds to the canon of her author. Therefore, it constitutes a contribution in the field of Irish adaptations of Greek myths. The revision of previous accounts, from Euripides to Fannin and Cranitch, has shown to what an extent the Irish playwright is close or departs other Phaedras and how she wrote the myth forward to make her free in her imagination, in the pastures of the unknown, where guilt and pain prevail over love. She has nothing to do with the sick and weak Euripidean queen and does not remain silent or unable to put into words what troubles her. Carr seems to have listened to the classical queen's request to the Nurse: "if only you could say for me what I must say,"[89] and is saying it all.

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Notes

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[1] Sternlicht, *Modern Irish Drama*, 150.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jordan, "Unmasking Myths?" 243.

[4] Ibid., 246.

[5] Sihra, "Greek Myth, Irish Reality," 116.

[6] Foley and Lalor, *Annotated Constitution*, 122-123.

[7] Rosende, "Iconografía Femenina Irlanda," 264. Evidence and references of these cultural personifications of Ireland as a woman can be found in theatrical representations from the stories of the Celtic goddesses Deirdre or Gráinne, rewritten afterwards by Yeats (*Deirdre*, 1907) and Lady Gregory (*Grania*, 1912). The aisling poems of the 18th century depicted the spéirbhean or sky-woman as a representation of Ireland under the harsh British oppression. Irish Nationalism brought the figures of Dark Rosaleen, who asked for freedom and embodied Catholic values, revised by Vincent Mahon in 1980, and Cathleen Ní Houlihan, an old woman who lamented the loss of her green fields and told young Irish men to recover their land by warfare, the protagonist of Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). Most recently Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's *Women in Arms* (1984) goes back to the stories of Nessa, Macha, Deirdre and Maeve to offer a contemporary perspective of women in Irish history.

[8] Sihra, "Greek Myth, Irish Reality," 132.

[9] Jordan, *Dissident Dramaturgies*, 158.

[10] Ibid., 164.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 166.

[13] Arkins, *Irish Appropriation Greek Tragedy*, 18.

[14] Ibid., 22.

[15] Ioannidou, *Greek Fragments Postmodern Frames*, 3.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Carr's plays based on Euripides, to the date, are *Hecuba*, (2015, Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon), *Phaedra Backwards*, (2011, McCarther Theatre Centre, Princeton), *Ariel*, (2002, Abbey Theatre, Dublin), based on *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *By the Bog of Cats…*, (1998, Abbey Theatre, Dublin), based on *Medea* and *Portia Coughlan*, (1996, Abbey Theatre, Dublin), based on *Hippolytus*. With echoes from Sophoclean *Electra* she wrote *The Mai* (1994, Abbey Theatre, Dublin).

[18] Trench, *Bloody Living*, 15.

[19] Sihra, *Pastures of the Unknown*, 258.

[20] Carr, *Plays 3*, 96.

[21] Lauriola, "Hippolytus," 448.

[22] Cave, "After Hippolytus," 105.

[23] O'Hanlon, "Friel's *Living Quarters*," 110.

[24] Randolph, "Shadow Side," 50.

[25]Carr in Rapetti, "Chasing Intangible," 257.

[26] Carr, *Plays 3*, 75.

[27] Ibid., 77.

[28] Ibid., 101.

[29] Carr, in Nagel, "Backwards and forwards," 5-6.

[30] Carr, *Plays 3*, 99.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 114.

[33] Ibid., 99.

[34] Ibid., 116.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 80.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 94.

[39] Ibid., 106.

[40] Ibid., 90.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 111.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 109.

[45] Ibid., 123.
[46] Ibid., 105.
[47] Ibid., 121.
[48] Ibid., 124.

[49] Ibid., 92.
[50] Ibid., 101.

[51] Ibid., 100.
[52] Sihra, "Obscene Transformations," 37-38.
[53] Carr, *Plays 3*, 101.
[54] Sihra, Pastures of the Unknown, 263.

[55] Ibid., 271.

[56] Homer, *Odyssey*, 133.

[57] Ibid., 135.

[58] Lauriola, "Hippolytus," 445. It must be noticed that Sophocles also wrote a tragedy with the title of *Phaedra,* that has been lost.

[59] Hall, "Introduction," xi.
[60] Ibid., xix.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., xxvii.
[63] Lauriola, "Hippolytus," 446.

[64] Ibid., 450.

[65] Ovid, *Heroides*, 32.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 33-34.

[68] Seneca, *Phaedra*, 117.

[69] Lauriola, "Hippolytus," 454.

[70] Seneca, *Phaedra*, 110.

[71] Ibid., 125.

[72] Ibid.,145.

[73] Ibid., 123.

[74] Lauriola, "Hippolytus," 456.

[75] Carr in Nagel, "Backwards and forwards," 5.

[76] Racine, *Phaedra*, 154.

[77] Ibid., 184.

[78] Ibid., 214.

[79] Lauriola, "Hippolytus," 466.

[80] Kane, *Complete Plays*, 71.

[81] Ibid., 90.

[82] Cranitch and Fannin, *Phaedra*, 8. My gratitude to the authors and their editor for facilitating the manuscript of the play.

[83] Ibid., 29.

[84] Ibid., 33.

[85] Carr, *Plays 3*, 89.

[86] Ibid., 119.

[87] Ibid., 123.

[88] Ibid., 125.

[89] Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays*, 49.