

## **Unconventional Femininity in the work of Suzan-Lori Parks and Marina Carr**

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### **Introduction**

Scholars have tended to locate and discuss the works of Irish dramatist Marina Carr and African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks within their national contexts.<sup>1</sup> This paper, however, will not address such contexts. Instead, by means of a comparative analysis of the work of these two successful female playwrights, I will investigate the ways in which realist drama can destabilise dominant conceptions of gender by subverting and disturbing culturally prescribed conventions of femininity.

The ways in which the careers and writing styles of Carr and Parks have developed have a great deal in common. Both had their plays first performed in the 1980s, and initially each playwright created absurdist, experimental pieces. More recently, Carr and Parks have both moved towards more traditional realist forms, and both have also garnered considerable critical recognition. In 2002, Parks became the first black female playwright to win a Pulitzer Prize. Carr won the E. M. Foster Award from the American Academy for Arts and Letters in 2001, and the AIF Literary Award in 2004. The shift to a more realist style, which seems to have contributed to the increased critical acclaim these women have received both nationally and internationally, and to their canonization, might be seen as problematic from a feminist perspective. However, I wish to argue that moving towards more patriarchal forms has allowed Parks and Carr to challenge the cultural construct of femininity from within the canon. This paper explores how both playwrights provide

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Carr’s work has been read in its national context by scholars such as Lisa Fitzpatrick and Anthony Roche; Parks’s by Robert Baker-White and Aja Marneweck,

feminist resistance and destabilize identity categorisations by challenging the authoritative fixities of gender, staging alternative femininities and by revealing gender as a cultural performance through the creation of successful, accessible dramas.

### **Feminism and Realism**

In the 1980s, feminists began to problematize the use of realist conventions in drama. In her introduction to *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, Helene Keyssar summarises the feminist arguments against realism. She cites Janelle Reinelt, who has struggled to see how “any kind of feminist statement” could be expressed in theatre in “traditional realistic terms” (6). Critics of realism take issue, for example, with the way in which the realist form attempts to mirror the audience’s reality; from some feminist perspectives, this re-inscribes the dominant patriarchal order. Elaine Aston explains that:

In contemporary feminist theatre where women have been seeking to take up a subject position they have looked to the ‘interrogative’ style of text and performance practice, in which the contradiction of the subject is split open in the interests of challenging and changing the symbolic or social orders. What women have contested and resisted are the oppressive systems of symbolic closure which, for example, characterise the dominant theatrical traditions of staging realism. (38).

Aston goes on to describe the theories of the French Feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, who advocate an explosion of conventional language usage and form to create a sense of circularity (as opposed to linearity) which would more accurately represent women’s experiences (45-56).

However, other feminists, such as Michelene Wandor, have identified the positive potential of the often co-dependent concepts of ‘realistic’ and ‘mainstream’

theatre. To demonstrate this possible value of the mainstream, Keyssar refers to Wandor's advocacy of realist conventions:

Critics hostile to realism argue that realism obliterates or disguises the construction of the world — all appears seamless and 'natural', and therefore appropriate. For Wandor, this is potentially a political good: it allows an audience of ordinary working-class and middle-class people to be at ease with the theatre and thus to be more receptive to political and social ideas and behaviours that they might otherwise avoid. (5)

Although the early, avant-garde plays of both Carr and Parks accord more with French Feminism and anti-realist theories, the feminist potential of their more mainstream pieces *Portia Coughlan* and *In the Blood* (which will be examined in the course of this paper), might be seen to have more impact because they reach a wider and more varied audience.,.

### **Shifting Styles: From Experimental to Traditional**

Carr's early, absurdist plays such as *Low in the Dark* (1989), *Ullaloo* (1989) and *This Love Thing* (1991) resist the realist model; these repetitive dramas lack any plot or character development. Similarly, the characters of Parks's early plays such as *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987) *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) are symbolic rather than realistic; these plays are also repetitive, as well as fragmented in structure. The stylistic shift in Carr's writing was quite abrupt, beginning with the first play in what has become known as her 'Midlands Trilogy,' *The Mai* (1994). Despite revelations of tragic outcomes in the middle of *The Mai* and Carr's subsequent work *Portia Coughlan* (1996), these plays ultimately lean towards a realist model of theatre, especially in terms of their psychological characterisations and recognisable language and settings. Maria Doyle identifies *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan* as 'the plays that solidified her reputation' (41). In her analysis, Doyle focuses on the way in

which Carr interrupts realist linearity by staging her protagonists' dead bodies before the end in these two plays; this paper examines *Portia Coughlan* in order to explore performativity and its feminist meanings in spite of — or perhaps because of — the use of realist conventions.

Compared with Carr, Parks's shift towards the traditional realist model was more gradual; *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) appears to conform more to realism than her previous work. However, Parks's move towards linear narrative began with her Obie Award winning *Venus* (1996), which stages her fictionalized reinterpretation of the story of Saartjee Baartman (also known as the Venus Hottentot, a nineteenth century African woman who was brought to England and exhibited because of her 'unusually large' posterior). Carol Schafer points out that the play 'has much in common' with Parks's earlier work, but that 'it serves as a transition to *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*' (181). Although the character of The Negro Resurrectionist reveals the tragic outcome at the beginning of the play, telling the audience that 'thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead' (3) the narrative develops in a linear fashion in comparison to her earlier, more fragmented works. Parks further refined her use of linear, tragic narrative with *In the Blood* (1999), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. This paper focuses on *In the Blood* in order to show how, despite its realism, the play challenges cultural constructions of femininity.

At an early stage in Parks's career, Alisa Solomon predicted that as the playwright becomes 'increasingly recognised, she too — as she well knows — will run the risk of seeing white institutions want to fix that flattening —d onto her roun writing' ('Signifying' 80). Parks's subsequent movement towards more realistic tragedy could certainly be viewed as confirmation of Solomon's prediction, particularly since she went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for a play that was, arguably,

her most ‘mainstream’ to date in terms of its tense, plot-driven and ultimately tragic psychological study of the relationship between two poverty-stricken brothers: *Topdog/Underdog*. In her discussion of *Topdog/Underdog*, Deborah R. Geis explores the apprehension with which the play was received by reviewers, noting that ‘it became time to worry that the dramatist had sold out by leaving the avant-garde and entering the Broadway mainstream’ (112).

Similarly, academics link Carr’s movement towards a more traditional model of theatre to her increased popularity and critical acclaim. Paula Murphy admits that this dramatist’s ‘change of direction [...] has not been adequately explained, but what is certain is that it moved her firmly into the mainstream, where she began to attract more critical attention’ (389). It is possible that Carr began to conform to more conservative dramatic traditions in order to be accepted by a wider audience and to appeal to the critics, but as Claire Wallace notes, ‘[f]rom the perspective of positive, politically aggressive feminism, Carr’s work might be said to have developed in a negative sense veering from a playful satirical feminism to grim patriarchal tragedy’ (87). Nevertheless, I wish to argue that despite Carr’s and Parks’s stylistic shift towards a more ‘patriarchal’ model of tragedy in the plays in question, which may have been instrumental in their respective ‘acceptances’ into the theatrical canon, productive feminist meanings may still be extracted from these works — particularly in terms of how such dramas reveal the performativity of gender.

### **Performativity and Gender Transgressions**

Characters who are unwilling or unable to conform to their culturally prescribed roles are prominent in the more realist plays of both Carr and Parks. Analysis of the function of characters who, often violently, resist gendered cultural expectations can

add to our understanding of how theatre can intervene in our perceptions of gender. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative, rather than innate, and that it is constructed through the repetition of gender 'acts' (154). According to Butler, 'gender is a project which has cultural survival at its end [...and] those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished' (156-157). If failing to act one's gender means non-conformance to socio-cultural codes of behaviour, resulting in punitive action such as reprimanding by others and cultural exclusion, then Butler's theory is particularly relevant to the ways in which the protagonists of these plays fail to fulfil acceptable feminine paradigms and, consequently, suffer punishment.

### ***Portia Coughlan***

The National Maternity Hospital in Dublin commissioned Carr's *Portia Coughlan*; Garry Hynes directed the first productions of the play at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin and, subsequently, at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1996. Most recently, Bluepatch Productions staged *Portia Coughlan* at the New Theatre, Dublin, in February 2009, under the directorship of Aoife Connolly. Throughout *Portia Coughlan*, members of Portia's family beseech her to behave as a 'normal' woman would. Instead, Portia resists this role: she is foul-mouthed, she attempts to seduce the local barman Fintan, has been having a long-term extramarital affair with another local man, Damus Halion, and, it transpires, had regular sexual relations with her twin brother Gabriel before he died. Her unfeminine vulgarity and promiscuity, along with her breaking of the incest taboo, mark her difference from her community.

From the beginning of the play, Portia transgresses the norms of her role as a homemaker. In the first scene, her husband Raphael points out her failings as a wife and mother with reference to her drinking in the morning, her refusal to partake in

domestic activities such as housework, and her apparent inability or unwillingness to adequately care for her children (193-194). Throughout the play, Carr dramatises the tormented psyche of Portia, who is involved in passionate psychological struggles with many of the other characters, especially those who coax her to conform. In the original script, Carr used phonetic spelling to accurately convey the flat Midlands accent; it is through the use of this distinctly rural Irish accent that Portia communicates her frustration with and rejection of the role society enforces upon her, exacerbated by the paucity and isolation of the play's pastoral setting. When the play is staged in Ireland, the audiences' familiarity with its language allows the communication of its disruptive thematic content.

Scene five is a telling scene in terms of Portia's resistance to her feminine role. Her mother, Marianne, refers to the untidiness of Portia's home, claiming that her daughter resists the example of feminine behaviour that she has set for her: 'You'd swear you were never taught how to Hoover a room or dust a mantel; bloody disgrace that's what ya are' (209). The stage directions reveal that as Marianne attempts to tidy the house 'with impotent rage,' Portia 'undoes what she does' (209). Actions speak louder than words in this scene, as Portia's actions nullify those of her mother; this reflects Portia's desire not only to erase what she now sees as mistakes (marrying Raphael, having children and failing to follow through on her suicide pact with her twin brother fifteen years before), but also to revise the historical, familial roots of the acquisition of the gender role that she now finds so stifling. Butler refers to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in order to explain that, rather than a natural fact, gender is a historical situation:

As an intentionally organised materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention. In other words, the body *is* a historical situation, as de Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatising and *reproducing* a historical situation. (156)

Marianne tries to mould Portia into a reproduction of this ‘historical’ construction of femininity through her own exemplary actions, circumscribed by society’s threat of punishment for resistance. According to Butler, gender is performed under a ‘situation of duress [...] with clearly punitive consequences’ (156-157). Marianne herself follows through on society’s punitive threat by reprimanding her daughter for her unconventional behaviour.

The final act of *Portia Coughlan* takes us back to the end of act one, before Portia’s suicide. At the end of the penultimate scene of the play, Portia puts on the dress that her parents have bought her for her thirtieth birthday. In the final scene, the stage directions tell us that she ‘sets the table, lights candles, opens wine, pours a glass, puts on diamond bracelet’ (252). The diamond bracelet was a birthday present from Raphael. Portia’s actions in this scene are usually viewed as her final (and, of course, tragic) attempts to be happy. In her review of the 1996 production of the play at the Royal Court Theatre in London, Joan Fitzpatrick Dean tells us that Portia, ‘[t]ransformed by the beautiful dress that her mother gives her for her birthday [...] momentarily flirts with happiness’ (234). However, Bluepatch’s more recent production of the play approached this moment differently. Portia’s actions and the dress became cultural significations that accord with her family’s — and indeed, society’s — conceptions of femininity. According to Butler:

The act that gender is, the act that embodied agents *are* inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed, *wear* certain cultural significations, is clearly not one’s act alone. Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one’s gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter. (160)

Playing Portia in the Bluepatch production, Andrea Scott wore the purple dress, which may be viewed as a symbol of the kind of femininity Portia’s parents have envisioned for her, *over* the long, red dress that she had been wearing throughout the



performance. The red dress could be seen to represent Portia's individuality or passion; in a way, this exposed the identity that the new dress represents as, to use Solomon's phrase, 'a disguise, a set of effects' (*Re-Dressing the Canon* 7). In addition, Scott performed Portia's actions and delivered the character's dialogue in a weary, forced and explicitly 'performed' way during this scene. Thus, Portia's apparent grasp at happiness is transformed into an affected attempt to conform to the socially acceptable paradigm of femininity that the other characters have been urging her to adopt. In this way, Scott's performance of Carr's text further reveals the performativity of gender.

According to Lisa Fitzpatrick, Carr and her Irish contemporaries Christina Reid and Anne Devlin 'challenge totalizing conceptions of identity by asserting the presence of difference in communities conceived as homogenous' (332). This is certainly true in *Portia Coughlan*, as Portia marks her difference from her family and friends through her unconventional actions and desires. However, Carr's play goes further than the work of her contemporaries; she uses her characterisation of 'difference' to demonstrate the deconstructive idea of femininity as a performance, both in the play text itself and in the opportunities it provides for the stage.

### ***In the Blood***

The promiscuous behaviours of the female protagonists in *Portia Coughlan* and *In the Blood* appear as deviant acts against cultural constructions of idealized femininity. In *Portia Coughlan*, having witnessed one of Portia's clandestine meetings with Damus, her father Sly urges her to 'put a halter on [her] wayward arse' (214). In Parks's *In the Blood*, Hester's promiscuity similarly contributes to her social exclusion throughout the play — even though the most prominent members of her hypocritical society all

contribute to her sexual exploitation. In the play's prologue, the chorus, representing the society which punitively excludes Hester, refers to her as a 'SLUT,' a 'HUSSY' and a 'BURDEN TO SOCIETY' (7). In the first scene, Hester and her son Jabber talk about the graffiti that has been scrawled on the wall of their 'home' under the bridge. Hester, who is illiterate, cannot read the word 'SLUT' which has been written on the wall; she asks her son Jabber to do so and he touchingly refuses in order to protect his mother's feelings (9). It is this word — with which society has branded Hester as a promiscuous outcast — that leads to her eventual murder of Jabber when he finally reads and repeats the word for her (104-106). In relation to this play and Parks's other, more Brechtian 'Hester' play *Fucking A* (2000), Verna A. Foster points out that '[b]oth Hesters attempt to conform to the conventional model of "good mother" [but] [t]he strain of doing so without any support contributes to their fatal actions' (77). However, this conventional model of the good mother also means a married mother. In the prologue of *In the Blood*, the chorus refers to Hester's five children as 'BASTARDS' (7). Hester's status as a social outcast partly results from the fact that, according to the chorus, 'SHE OUGHTA BE MARRIED' (5), but she is not.

*In the Blood* was first produced at The Joseph Papp Public Theatre in November 1999 with Charlayne Woodard in the lead role. In his review of the performance, David Krasner identifies the presentation of a wedding gown to the protagonist and her subsequent wearing of this gown (both in scene 7) as moments that demonstrate the play's potential in performance, although he criticises the 'unimaginative' staging of this particular scene (567). In this scene — as with the final scene of *Portia Coughlan* — clothing becomes an important object in the performance of culturally acceptable femininity. The action involves the return of Chilli, Hester's first love and the father of her firstborn. Chilli carries with him a

basket of ‘props’ including the wedding dress, a veil, and a ring. These props represent the idealised version of femininity that he wishes Hester to adopt. According to the stage directions, Chilli puts the wedding dress on Hester ‘right over her old clothes’ (90). Like the image of Portia in Bluepatch’s production of *Portia Coughlan*, this moment suggests that Chilli’s socially acceptable notion of gender is a set of effects that conceal the ‘real’ Hester. It is clear from the dialogue as well as the stage directions that this scene in particular has disruptive potency in relation to totalising conceptions of femininity.

Through Chilli’s actions and dialogue, scene 7 exposes what Verna A. Foster refers to as the conventional model of good mother, and by extension of femininity, as a ‘cultural fiction’ (Butler 157). He tells Hester that ‘I carried around this picture of you. Sad and lonely with our child on yr hip. Struggling to make do. Struggling against all odds. And triumphant. Triumphant against everything. Like—hell, like Jesus and Mary. And if they could do it so could my Hester. My dear Hester’ (96). This speech suggests that it is not Hester he wishes to marry but his own culturally informed fiction of what she should be.

Idealised icons of women and, in particular, religious iconography of the Virgin Mary inform Chilli’s image of the mother as an almost virginal martyr. However, the embodiments of Hester’s promiscuity — her four children by fathers other than Chilli — again lead to punitive consequences for the protagonist. When Chilli finds out about these children, he rejects Hester because of her inability to live up to the feminine paradigm based on purity and heterosexual monogamy which both he and society ultimately value. Chilli proceeds to take all his props — the ring, the dress, the veil — and to pack up his basket; despite Hester’s pleas, he apologises and exits (96). Hester’s final opportunity to be happy — or, her last chance to conform to

the model of long-term heterosexual union and to perform as an acceptable wife and mother — vanishes with Chilli's departure.

Examining the play's use of the structure of classical tragedy, Schafer identifies Hester's tragic flaw as her 'error to distinguish that love is separable from the act of love making' (192). According to Schafer:

As representative of the chorus, the patriarchal Chilli invites the audience to imagine Hester as innocent and then see her as she is. Her tragic flaw is illuminated by the audience's recognition that Hester can never be the idealized object of the gaze. (193).

In addition, the fact that Hester's promiscuity prevents her from embodying socially acceptable femininity demonstrates a punitive social response in accord with Butler's theories. Chilli's, and indeed society's, rejection of Hester shows how 'culture so readily punishes or marginalises those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism' or 'to do their gender right' (Butler 162, 157). In this way, *In the Blood* reveals gender as culturally constituted and, therefore, 'capable of being constituted differently' (155). Although *In the Blood* has, for the most part, a linear, tragic and 'patriarchal' form, the play contains the feminist potential to interrogate valued conceptions of femininity, thereby encouraging readers and audience members to consider alternatives to these valued and restrictive conceptions.

## **Conclusion**

A sense of the protagonist's exclusion is common to both of the plays discussed in this paper. Hester La Negrita of Parks's *In the Blood* is ostracized and experiences punitive consequences mainly because of her socio-economic status as a black woman with five children of varying parentage — the physical symbols of her promiscuity — supported by social welfare. Carr's iconoclastic Portia Coughlan is socially excluded because she breaks taboos and usurps the conventions of wife and mother. Both

playwrights employ some of the features of conventional patriarchal tragedy such as realistic settings, psychological character studies and plot-driven narratives, but use these to imagine alternatives to conventional femininity. According to Lynda Hart, in realistic theatre, female characters often ‘get raped, go crazy and die’ (5). In particular, the character of Portia Coughlan challenges this model. She is sexually promiscuous — predatory, even; rather than ‘going crazy,’ she acts against stifling codes of behaviour. Ultimately, by portraying characters who oppose the dominant cultural ideals of femininity, Parks’s *In the Blood* and Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* expose conventional femininity as a performative cultural construct.

Realist drama invites audience identification and attempts to mirror the audience’s reality. Although the early plays of Parks and Carr accord more with the anti-realist circularity put forward by French feminist theory, their uses of realist conventions, such as psychological characterisation and realistic settings and language, allow them to reflect the performance of gender in contemporary culture. Parks’s *In the Blood* and Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* expose the culturally constituted nature of gender. The act of showing that gender is performative has, in itself, transformative possibilities; according to Butler, if we consider gender to be constituted, then it is capable of being constituted differently (155). The plays in question therefore contain productive feminist meanings, despite their use of realist conventions. In addition, Wandor’s notion of the radical possibilities of realism can be applied to the plays this paper has examined. Through the realistic characterisation of alternative femininities, Parks and Carr deconstruct gender from within the canon. They thereby present gender-conscious enquiry in an accessible way to a much wider audience, which ultimately justifies their adoption of realist conventions and subsequent entrance into the mainstream. Parks and Carr may no longer be ‘in exile’

from the canon since they adopted more conventional styles, but their more stylistically 'mainstream' dramas stage characters who are in exile from mainstream culture and who contest accepted, but restrictive, cultural constructions of femininity.

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