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Performativity of Gender in Marina Carr's

Low in the Dark

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Abstract:

This paper discusses Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark* primarily in relation to its concern with gender identity. Grounding my analysis in Judith Butler's writing on gender and performance, I discuss how Carr explores these issues in both the form and the content of the play. By modeling the style and the structure on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Carr prepares the audience for the absurdist elements within the play, as her characters explore their gendered sides of the stage and engage in a series of absurd, abstract performances. I demonstrate, then, how the exaggerated and unrealistic role playing illustrate Carr's point about the arbitrariness and fluidity of gender roles, as well as the importance of performance in defining one's gender. Therefore, the characters are liminal in the sense that they are neither men nor women but can oscillate between the two simply by donning a pair of heels or picking up a pair of knitting needles. I also argue that Carr explores the issue of gender performance through many conventions of theatre, displaying a postmodern self-awareness in the play's multiple meta-theatrical elements. Finally, I discuss the importance of language in the play, focusing specifically on the use of naming in demarcating gender status.

Introduction

Drama is a powerful place for examining cultural conceptions and expectations for female bodies alongside language that shapes the body and creates a gendered identity. In other words, the tension between language and bodies allows the audience to see the performativity of gender, which is the molding of gender and the gendered body onstage. Marina Carr, an Irish playwright born in 1964, has inherited a Beckettian legacy and has created her own incarnation of tragedy based on female protagonists whose words and bodies enact their gender identities in present-day Irish Midlands' communities.

Eammon Jordan, writing in *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, describes Carr as:

The most complicated, confrontational and disturbing writer of the latest generation of Irish playwrights. As a playwright, she has the skills to manipulate the intricate realities of contemporary living, moving the spectator behind and beyond the facade of social norms, mores, conventions and expectations, locating the points of greatest contention and delivering moments of pure savagery, while still creating convincing dramas that are replete with intricate, maimed, destructive, wayward and marginal characters who are full of unrealizable longing. (243)

Generally speaking, Carr's plays foreground the female body even as the characters' words attempt to redefine their social positions, renegotiate their identities, and resist restrictions they face as women in a largely patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on Carr's early play *Low in the Dark* (1989) as a genre-bending play that explores motherhood as a specific kind of gender performativity that combines the gendered maternal body and discourse surrounding motherhood expectations. Thus, this paper tries to show how motherhood becomes a performative role with high stakes. Moreover, the paper illustrates how Carr creates a tension between stereotypes that inhere in language and the ambiguous gendering of the body to show that both are insufficient to create a coherent gendered identity.

Performativity of Gender Dilemma

Theatre questions the complicated issue of performativity because performativity includes both linguistic and bodily influences in constructing gender identity. Raised by speech act theory, filtered through deconstruction, and refined in gender studies, performativity can help us build a bridge between our understanding of gender in everyday life and the presentation of gender onstage. J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterances describes a category of language endowed with the ability to act: "I promise, I do, I curse, I dare." These formulations, in Austin's theory, perform an action through their utterance. Judith Butler applies the idea of

performatives to gender theory and argues that gender itself is a continuous performance through both language and gesture.

In the 1999 preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler summarizes the performativity of gender by writing, “[I]n the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself” (xiv-xv). Put differently, there is no stable essence of gender but only that which is continually produced. She continues, “Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*Gender Trouble* xv). Gender, then, must be continuously reinforced in and through the body across time.

Butler’s view of gender, then, harmonizes with Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of embodied subjectivity as a combination of language, cultural discourse, and bodily experience. Grosz emphasizes embodied subjectivity, the idea that our identities cannot be based on a Cartesian, dualistic conception of mind and body; rather, the body must be taken into account as an integral and integrated part of subjectivity. By considering both language and body in subjectivity, Grosz prepares the way for a discussion of the performativity of gender as a continuous re-adjustment and reinforcement of words and behaviors.

Grosz’s introduction to *Volatile Bodies* masterfully argues against several restricting notions of the body: First, she claims that the mind should not be privileged over the body, making the body only a house for the mind or soul. Rather, the body should receive equal status in subjectivity such that the body’s sensations and perceptions form part of identity rather than being viewed as incidental. Second, female bodies should not be viewed as “natural” or more aligned with nature than male bodies, along the lines of the nature/culture dichotomy. Third, although the body is shaped by cultural discourse, it is not only a product of this discourse; its sensations, feelings, and embodied experience do not arise solely from linguistic means. That is, the body’s phenomenological experience should be acknowledged as part of gender identity. Fourth, in order to make a feminist account of the body, female bodies should not be essentialized because not all women’s bodies are the same and not all women experience their bodies the same ways.

Grosz concludes that embodied subjectivity should be central to feminism because this embodiment theory provides a more complete picture of the forces influencing identity. She writes, “The body is neither—while also being both—the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined” (Grosz 23). Grosz emphasizes that these dichotomies about the

body should not be strictly upheld but rather that the interrelationship between biological and cultural forces be taken into account. Despite her attention to the body, she adds a caution that we should not reduce the body to a monolithic, simplistic conception. She writes, "In the face of social constructionism, the body's tangibility, its matter, its (quasi) nature may be invoked; but in opposition to essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed" (Grosz 23-24). Rather than essentializing biology, a theory of embodied subjectivity should take into account both the physical realities of the body and its shaping through cultural forces. At the same time, Grosz recognizes the difficulties of upholding a feminist representation of the body while also acknowledging reproductive bodies and even violated bodies as part of subjectivity.

In addition to Grosz's, Butler's view of gender as a kind of never-ending performance attempts to account for both body and language, and she continues to explore the relationship between the two in *Excitable Speech* (1997). In her Derridean reading of Austin, performativity has come to mean more than words with superpowers but has rather begun to stand for the ability of words and bodily gestures to inscribe, define, construct, and challenge identity. Austin's original sense of performative utterances has not been completely lost, since Butler considers language a primary way of constructing gender, but performativity now encompasses both words and actions that contribute to gender formation.

Rather than positing an autonomous subject whose words can speak actions into being from a position of authority, Butler's theories posit the subject in continuous formation, being shaped and re-shaped through the linguistic and bodily process of interpellation into a particular gendered identity. The relationship between speech and body becomes one of Butler's primary concerns, since there is an ongoing tension between the two. Butler explains, "The speech act, however, is performed bodily, and though it does not instate the absolute or immediate presence of the body, the simultaneity of the production and delivery of the expression communicates not merely what is said, but the bearing of the body as the rhetorical instrument of expression" (*Excitable* 152). Although speech arises from bodily means, speech does not stabilize the meaning of the body. At the same time, the body exists as the source of words and remains outside the words' meaning.

For Butler, performatives both reinscribe a person within social conditions and challenge those conditions. This troubled relationship between reinforcing and defying lies at the heart of my discussion of gender performativity. She claims, "Performatives do not merely reflect prior social conditions, but produce a set of social effects, and though they are not always the effects of "official" discourse, they nevertheless work their social power not only to regulate bodies, but to form them as well. Indeed, the efforts of performative discourse exceed and confound the authorizing contexts from which they emerge" (*Excitable* 158-159). This ability to

“exceed and confound” social conditions provides an avenue in which people can resist the terms by which they are defined through linguistic and bodily means. Butler and others such as Peggy Phelan grapple with the complexities of embodied subjectivity by considering the continuous fashioning of the body through discourse and public display. Performativity includes the enactment and reinforcement of gender and the resistance to normative, constricting categories of gender identity, thus foregrounding the struggle between societal restrictions placed on identity and the desire to stretch or tear these limiting categories.

Despite the fact that Butler sees gender itself as a kind of continuous performance, she has excluded theatrical performance as a way to understand the workings of gender in everyday life. She has argued that performativity does not apply to theatrical situations because the audience can think, “‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one’s sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce ‘this is only a play’ allow strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life” (“Performative Acts” 527). Thus, she believes that this form of deliberate performance negates the conditions that occur in everyday performances.

Although I recognize that theatre performance is a special category of performances, theatre can provide a concentrated environment that heightens rather than diminishes the visibility of gender formation. Further, Butler argues that the performativity of gender in everyday life involves physical and verbal reinforcement of gender identity that cannot be accurately presented in theatre performance: “gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions” (“Performative Acts” 527). Despite her point that some audience members may dismiss the actions of characters in theatre because it is not “real,” her objections unfairly foreclose on the possibilities of theatre to represent performativity powerfully. Rather, I contend that she provides a framework for thinking about how performativity might be productively enacted in theatre so that the rewards and punishments of gendered subjectivity become apparent.

In drama and performance studies, Butler’s anti-theatre argument has sparked a debate about the efficacy of theatre as a place to engage performativity. Jill Dolan’s well-known article, “Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the ‘Performative’” provides some compelling reasons for allowing theatre to be part of the dialogue on performativity. First, she argues that “[t]heatrical performance also offers a temporary and usefully ephemeral site at which to think through questions

of the signifying body, of embodiment, of the undecidability of the visual, and of the materiality of the corporeal” (426). In other words, theatre performances should not be excluded as sites of performativity but recognized as a particular kind of site in which the body becomes central to performance. Dolan also asks, “How can the liveness of theatre performance reveal performativity?” (431) and replies by claiming, in direct opposition to Butler, “The theatrical frame doesn’t have to render transgression safe” (434). Despite Butler’s claim that theatre reduces one’s personal stake in performing an unconventional gender identity, theatre does not have to insulate the audience from seeing the ways that marginal sexual and gender identities are punished in society. By challenging Butler, Dolan encourages a debate about the ways that theatre can create a space to engage with performativity. Hence, this paper illustrates how Carr’s *Low in the Dark* deliberately foregrounds the formation of the character’s gender identity through cultural discourse, the character’s speech, and prominently displayed bodies.

By examining *Low in the Dark* in terms of performativity, I question several facets of Butler’s argument in “Performative Acts”: First, she gives little credit to the audience for relating the performance to their own words and bodies rather than dismissing representations of gender and their consequences. Although some audience members may choose to disconnect a performance from their own experience, other audience members are capable of and willing to engage with questions about gender in the theatre space. That is, they are willing to respond to the process of gendering the character and the positive or negative consequences that character incurs. Second, theatre has the possibility to present quite tangibly the dangers of transgressing social boundaries and “doing” one’s gender the wrong way. A receptive audience, together with a powerful representation of gender, thus enables theatre to heighten gender issues that spectators may not have noticed in everyday life.

The idea that theatre itself is an ever-new incarnation, then, echoes Butler’s concept of the continuous performance of gender, but I argue that the embodiedness of theatre creates an advantage in making the performativity of gender more visible. Ann Pellegrini, in *Performance Anxieties*, contends, “If I try to get to what performativity means by citing specific performances; if I try to make the interarticulation of gender, race, and sexuality in some way speak through these performance pieces—perhaps this is because ‘we’ (the collective and collaborative ‘we’ of writer and reader, performer and audience) can only catch ourselves in the act of becoming subject when we see ourselves as if through the other’s ‘I.’ Theatrical, cinematic, and textual scenes of identification restage that other scene, but with a critical distance built in” (10-11). She identifies a critical distance present in performance that is crucial for spectators to engage with the issues of gender, race, and sexuality being presented. Performances,

then, can be efficacious sites for analyzing and interrogating the relationships between bodies and discourse because they are not part of everyday life. In the twentieth anniversary issue of *Women and Performance* (2005), Tom Lavazzi claims, "Postmodern bodies in general have this in common with onstage bodies of male and female performers: as much as they may be altered by dress or cosmetics (or cosmetic surgery), there remains a perceivable tension, a lack of resolution - among put on and put off identities, 'real' and 'theatricalized' forms" (101). Lavazzi goes on to praise The Monroe Project, a performance group whose work fruitfully destabilizes identities, but his initial statement has value for the recognition that identities are fluid, tenuous, and frequently re-negotiated. Since people's "real" lives may be performed to the same extent as identities we see presented in theatre performances, Lavazzi and Pellegrini suggest that theatre uniquely enables spectators to struggle with the notion of embodied subjectivity and its interplay with gender. Thus, the following discussion demonstrates how Carr's *Low in the Dark* illustrates and amplifies the performativity of gender by considering the presentation of female bodies and the language that shapes, amends, dictates, and resists various forms of gendered identities.

***Low in the Dark* Reception**

Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark* introduces an innovative genre-bending style, which evince strong Beckettian non-linear form. Reporting for the New York Times, James F. Clarity wrote in 1994, "[H]er early plays, produced in small theatres, were bizarre absurdist affairs that generally left their audiences puzzled. Those works, she [Carr] said, were her Beckett phase" (C23). Charles McNulty, from *American Theatre*, adds that, "[W]hile Beckett's legacy looms deservedly large for contemporary Irish playwrights, it wasn't until Carr shook off his ghost that she truly came into her own." Beckett's legacy indeed looms large in Carr's early work as a dramatic style built on dark humor and satire, but this early phase of her career should not be disregarded as somehow inferior. Some critics see her shift in style as a change from juvenilia to mature work; as Clare Wallace observes, "[A]s avant-garde drama has never had an wide following in Ireland, it is unsurprising that these [early] plays did not meet with an exceptionally enthusiastic response. In critical terms they seem fated to be regarded principally as juvenilia, youthful experiments on the road to a more mature dramatic oeuvre" (446).

In contrast to these critics' claims, I view her earlier work, and specifically *Low in the Dark*, as containing a different but well-developed style that introduces the same ideas as her later work but in a different way. Building on Beckett's tradition of creating episodic plays that revolve around pairs of characters interacting, Carr constructs *Low in the Dark* as a

series of sketches and role-plays that interrogate gendered bodies and language. Whereas Beckett's characters often manifest a dread of or disgust with fertility, Carr takes this obsession in the opposite direction by depicting excessive fertility and exhibiting the maternal body in unusual ways. In both, though, the threat of abandonment or harming children plays a role, but Carr makes these concerns central rather than placing them in the background as Beckett does.

Moreover, the maternal body becomes a mutable, fluid site with male pregnancies. In *Low in the Dark* every serious conflict about mothering and femininity becomes a means of satirizing itself, especially as words and bodies come into tension with each other. As Anna McMullan writes, "*Low in the Dark* refuses to idealize the role of mother in relation to female identity. Maternity is taken to parodic extremes as both male and female characters become pregnant" (42). Thus, the continual display of pregnant characters, both male and female, continues to weaken the connection between motherhood and a female gendered identity.

Mutability and Performativity of the Maternal Body

Low in the Dark anticipates maternal violence in more comic ways by creating a mother-daughter pair who physically fight and compete to display greater fertility and even to date the same men. It presents motherhood as a specific subset of gender roles, which rely on the concept of embodied subjectivity. Composed of both biological and cultural forces, maternal roles, as part of gender identity, arise from manifestations of the maternal body and discourse surrounding motherhood. Likewise, by viewing motherhood as a continuous performance that can both reinforce and resist societal conventions of gender, I pinpoint motherhood as a performative role that combines the phenomenological materiality of the body and the semiotics of discourse. While some aspects of *Low in the Dark* foreground gendering of the body, the attention to physical signifiers is embedded in conversations rife with gendered language that both confirms and undermines bodily representation. Carr combines Butler's emphasis on the power of "excitable speech" with attention to embodiment to create a fuller account of performativity that emphasizes the semiotics and phenomenology of gender representation.

Low in the Dark subverts stereotypes through a humorous combination of excessive pregnancies and gendered language, while interrogating the mutability and threat of the pregnant body, the cultural expectations for being the ideal mother, and the tensions between fertility and femininity. If Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett's hapless pair from *Waiting for Godot*, were female, they might look and sound something like Bender and Binder, the mother and daughter in *Low in the Dark*. Didi and Gogo's wandering, humorous conversations and conflicted desire to part each other's company prefigure Carr's mother-daughter pair who spends the play in a constant quarrel. While Didi and Gogo worry that they might begin

to “mean something,” Bender and Binder, however, attach meaning to their identities as women and mothers, such as their sexual attractiveness and fertility.

Although language in the play tends to cling to gendered stereotypes inherent in names, labels, and clichés, the bodies onstage simultaneously revel in displays of maternity and drain motherhood’s gendered associations through male pregnancies and unexpected behavior. The maternal body is the most prevalent body on stage, from Bender, who gives birth continuously, to the pregnancies of Binder, and the two male characters: Bone, and Baxter. Kelly Oliver calls the maternal body the “body without borders” because of the way that the maternal body splits into the mother and the baby, thus seeming to spread out and diverge (61). The ubiquity of pregnant bodies and babies makes this phrase literal because the audience cannot avoid seeing them. These pregnant bodies become a source of obvious humor and satire, but they also foreground the responsibilities of being a “good” woman, including the conflation of fertility and femininity based on the display of the reproductive body.

By representing pregnancy in excessive, unusual ways, Carr reinforces that “normal” motherhood does not exist. The mutability of the maternal body is also instrumental in the performativity of maternal roles because these roles arise from both the gendered body and gendered behavior. Specifically, *Low in the Dark* highlights the fear that mothers may socialize their children into restrictive gender categories and hamper them for life. Gendered bodies, gender roles and maternal roles become intertwined at points and separated at others, since both men and women can experience pregnancy in this play. While we might generally regard motherhood as a subset of female gender roles - since women most often take on the responsibilities of mothering - this play subverts that convention even while evoking many of the gender stereotypes associated with heterosexual relationships and childrearing.

The Materiality of the Grotesque Maternal and Nursing Body

Attention to gendering begins with the physical layout of the set, which creates rigidly gendered spaces. One side of the stage is the men’s area, consisting of “tyres, rims, unfinished walls and blocks strewn about” (*Low in the Dark* 5). On the other side of the stage, the women’s area consists of a “bizarre bathroom: bath, toilet and shower,” which are full of babies (5). This set immediately creates gendered spaces, which are then transgressed as the characters play with different gender roles. While these areas establish where the characters will normally stay, they exist in order to make gender conventions ridiculous rather than to enforce them. The deliberate artifice of the stage design calls attention to itself and prompts the viewer to grapple with these radically different sites (Winston 266). When

Bone gets pregnant, for example, he alternates between knitting a stitch and laying a brick in his wall, thus demonstrating how he limns the boundary between female activities and male activities. Within the women's area, the bathroom becomes the focal point for the birth and care of babies, thus conflating the scene of birth and excretion to emphasize the abjection of the birthing process. The birthing and caring for these children becomes one of the central conflicts between Bender and Binder during the play.

Bender and Binder's conversations and disputes often focus on motherhood and mother/child relationships, revealing that conventions of femininity and mothering often become conflated in gendered language or stereotypical statements. Bender, a fifty-something woman, is the most prolific mother in the play, giving birth to babies (represented by dolls) and continuing to nurse them in multiple scenes, despite the fact that she is past the age when most women experience menopause. Her daughter Binder, a twenty-something woman, both resents her mother's fertility and tries to emulate it by helping to nurse the babies and having a child of her own. Her fascination with the babies evinces a stereotypically 1950s style duty toward motherhood and raising children, but her interactions with the babies proves less idealized and even dangerous though humorously presented.

The first scene of the play is about birth and mothering: Bender miraculously gives birth silently and then launches into an argument with Binder over the sex of the baby, the care of the baby, and the number of babies Bender has had. Within this dialogue, the two women keep disputing over the sex of the baby and the gendered traits associated with the baby. Binder initially says, "babies are always boys," but throughout the conversation they both change their minds several times about the sex of the baby. Although the sex of a child would seem to be obvious, Carr makes it ambiguous and contested by having the characters re-classify the baby repeatedly. Already the role of biological determinacy is being questioned in favor of the view that socialization and interpellation into the dominant gender ideology will have more effect on the baby's life.

This fact in itself highlights sexual anatomy as a performative category, invoking Butler's claim that the original "[I]t's a girl" sets in motion a lifetime of being inscribed within normative behaviours, both sexual and gendered. The fact that the two women cannot decide on the baby's sex seems at first like a farcical joke, but it leads to the larger process of inscribing the rules of gendered behavior into a child's body. For example, Binder starts breast-feeding the baby and claims, "[S]he sucks like a man," to which Bender says, "She'll have luck so!" In this case, the strength of sucking carries several connotations. First, sucking connotes oral sex, but to say "she sucks like a man" seems unusual. More likely, to compliment a woman for this skill, it would be more typical to say, "she sucks like a pro," i.e., a prostitute. In this line, Carr displays a trend that continues throughout the play, of combining two cliches in unexpected ways

to reveal how gendered expectations cling to these clichés even when they are fragmented. We might expect, “[T]ake it like a man!”, but not “she sucks like a man” (*Low in the Dark* 9). Nevertheless, in this scene, sucking becomes a gendered trait and a measure of future success. For a female baby to suck like a man means that she acquires masculine traits such as being vigorous, ambitious, strong, and demanding of attention, despite the fact that sucking itself is a female trait in this context.

Only a few lines later, when the baby is deemed male, Bender tells Binder to “put him in the shower and give him a doll.” When Binder protests, “[T]hey’re for the girl-babies,” Bender says, “[W]ell then give him a train and give his mother a drink!” (*Low in the Dark* 9-10). This common division between gendered toys again highlights the extent to which parents often socialize their children in specifically gendered ways by giving them gender-appropriate toys. Furthermore, the drinking mother blatantly ignores the health threats of nursing or pregnant mothers consuming alcohol. Carr focuses on aspects of parenting that only exist in the background of Beckett’s plays, such as the absent parents in *Not I* who abandon their child to be raised in an orphanage.

Carr continues to use reversals to startle the audience and create humor, and these reversals often come in the form of outrageously gendered bodies as well as gendered language that relies on clichés. Imagine a bathtub full of different-colored babies and a mother-daughter duo who alternate between nursing the babies and throwing them haphazardly around the stage. These interactions with the babies are the moments of greatest abandon, chaos, and farce in the play, when the body is showcased even while its gender and safety are being blatantly disregarded. In one moment, they agree the baby is a boy and the next insist that it is a girl, thus creating expectations for the audience and then subverting them in unexpected ways. When Bender asks Binder to give back the baby, Binder yells, “[T]ake her then! (*Throws the baby*) But don’t expect me to hit her when she starts screaming!” (*Low in the Dark* 11). First, Binder surprises the audience by throwing the baby, which might be shocking if the baby were not a stuffed doll. While we might expect Binder’s response to be, “don’t expect me to hug her” if she cries, instead Binder threatens a gesture of abuse instead of a gesture of affection. In the context of the sentence, though, it is clear that hitting is the typical reaction because Bender does not seem surprised at all. Binder first puts the child at risk by throwing it and then claims that abuse is normal; in fact, hitting is the expected response. Already the conventions of child care and protection have been completely dismantled, leaving the ideal of an all-patient, affectionate mother far behind.

Maternal Ambivalence and Gender Stereotype

While Bender initially cannot agree on a baby's sex, she later differentiates between her babies in terms of social roles: the Black Sheep, the Doctor, the President, and the Pope babies, all traditionally male professions. Only the Black Sheep in this list exists as an outcast; the other children have highly prestigious, important careers ahead of them in medicine, politics, and the Church. In Catholic Ireland, being the Pope is hypothetically the highest calling for any person; even having a priest in the family might be the hope of many parents. She favors the Pope and wants him to be fed as much as possible so that he will be healthy and fat and so that he will take care of her when she is old. Nevertheless, the fact that the dolls are literally stuffed representations of children in various colors makes the scenes of nursing them even more farcical. Combined with the specific professions Bender gives them, such as Doctor and Pope, the unrealistic bodies of the children create a disjunction between verbal labels that indicate gender and bodies that undermine these labels.

The parenting tension likewise speaks to the issue of maternal ambivalence, which comes across strongly in Bender and Binder's relationship as well as in the favoritism shown to certain babies. Ambivalence in this sense does not consist of lukewarm feelings but rather of deeply conflicting feelings existing side by side - love and hate for the child (Parker 1). This ambivalence can be seen above when Bender simultaneously nurses and drinks alcohol; she is nurturing and endangering the child at the same time. In this case, Bender has labeled the children from infancy and deliberately treats the Pope better than any of the others. Curtains – the fifth character - identifies the dangers of slighting a child, when she says of the neglected one, “[H]e'll grow up disturbed, kill you when he's twenty-one,” thus becoming the Black Sheep of the family (*Low in the Dark* 52). Binder, as a living example of a jaded twenty-something, says she wishes she had killed her mother at, thus foreshadowing the daughter's murder of her mother in Carr's later play *Ariel* (2002) (*Low in the Dark* 52). In one sense, this dialogue plays off a parent's worst fears of permanently damaging a young child, but it also shows Bender charging ahead in placing one child above the others, regardless of the consequences.

Bender defends herself by introducing another gender stereotype about careers and education that girls will not excel in math as much as boys but should be given the chance anyway. She replies, “I never prevented you from learning calculus, did I?” (52). Thus, Bender is claiming to have performed well as a parent by giving her daughter the chance for a complete education, and Binder should understand the opportunities she has been given. This scene builds through these layers of cultural text about motherhood and parent/child relationships. At every step, a parent risks making a dangerous mistake or limiting a child's potential based on gender stereotypes, thus opening the door for the child's future hatred or violence.

Motherhood and Female Gendered Identity.

These gender stereotypes that persist so strongly in language are juxtaposed with gendered bodies that subvert essentialized notions of motherhood. The appearance of the breastfeeding mothers and the constant feeding of numerous babies is the most farcical, outrageous display of the maternal body. While breasts are usually associated with their sexual attractiveness, in this scene the maternal function of breastfeeding takes precedence. Moreover, the mothers' behavior blatantly disregards the children's gender and bodily safety. In order to visualize the scene, I draw on Sarahjane Scaife's description of the first production:

There were dozens of babies, made up of wrapped, stuffed cotton, with different colour codes. In the bath, Bender was constantly dropping babies and feeding them, and demanding more. Both Bender and myself [Binder] had fantastic John Paul Gaultier style boned costumes with cone shaped 'boobs,' Madonna style. The 'boobs' unzipped to reveal babies' faces on them. We were constantly unzipping them to feed the babies.

(10)

By making breasts the obvious visual focus, these costumes ask the audience to stare at women's chests, thus ignoring the usual injunction not to ogle in public. These costumes accentuate the breasts in a sexual, but slightly unusual way by making them conical and by painting babies' faces on them. While most people may avoid staring at breastfeeding women in public, these costumes invite and practically demand that the audience participate in that kind of staring. Unzipping boob covers to reveal babies' faces also plays on the grotesque form of humor that Carr has already employed in the dialogue. The babies are unavoidably present, and the women are perpetually linked to their maternal, breastfeeding roles, emphasizing the grotesque maternal body as "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing" (Russo 8).

While Bender and Binder spend some of the play fighting and in competition, other interactions focus instead on the (often negative) roles of men in their romantic relationships. Shortly after the first birth of the play, Binder helps Bender compose a letter to the absentee father of the baby. Even though this effort represents one instance of collaboration between the two, their constant disagreements throughout the scene keep up the antagonistic tone of their relationship. This scene capitalizes on the features of a one-night stand: Bender cannot remember for certain the man's name, occupation, or address, which certainly does not bespeak a commitment from her or him. On the contrary, she seems to write because of social expectation, claiming, "I'd better write to him. Get out the pen and paper!" (*Low in the Dark* 11). In the process of writing the letter, they dredge up

another stereotype, that women always cry when they conceive - or if they don't, according to Bender, they should (14). This scene addresses stereotypes only to subvert them and ridicule them; in this case, the letter implicates the mother as well as the father in an apathetic stance toward the child. The letter is a farce, as seen by the fact that the two women cannot decide on the child's gender or say anything for certain about the father. They begin like this:

Bender: My dearest ... My dearest? My dearest man, I am writing to tell you that you have another son...

Binder: Daughter!

Bender: That you have another child. It was a difficult birth but...

Binder: It wasn't! (*Low in the Dark* 13)

The letter cannot even be sent because the location of the father is unknown, but Bender is completely unconcerned. While we usually associate this kind of letter with locating the deadbeat dad after a one-night stand, here the deadbeat mom is equally to blame for not knowing or caring about the history of the father.

Not only do Bender and Binder undermine stereotypes about how babies should be identified, labeled, and raised, but they also critique the gender roles surrounding childbirth. After her silent birth, Bender goes into the throes of childbirth again, and this time Binder jumps into a role-play, donning a hat and tails in order to play the part of an insensitive, 1950s-style sitcom father at his child's birth. While Bender writhes and screams "Epiduuraal!" the man (aka Binder) asks whether dinner is ready and where his slippers are. He ineptly pats her head while the baby is being born and then rushes out of the room holding the new baby boy (*Low in the Dark* 15-16). In a play where childbirth is as common as eating dinner, this violent birth scene presents one model of ineffective relationships, but it does so in such a grotesquely comical way that the audience would probably laugh rather than cry at the man's cruelty. The maternal body dominates this scene, in one of its many manifestations during the play. In effect, this scene enacts the pain of giving birth (in contrast to the silent birth earlier) and the fear of having inadequate support during that time.

This scene of physical comedy and role play corresponds to a kind of grotesque, farcical humor that attempts to surprise and even disorient the audience. James Symons explains in relation to Vsevolod Meyerhold's plays:

For Meyerhold, then, the theatre was not to be a mirror which reflects upon us our own daily lives, nor was it a place to depict life as viewed through glasses romantic, sentimental, comic, or tragic. It was, instead, a place for confronting an audience, through conventionalized means peculiar to the theatre, with a synthesized distillation of life's extremities in

conflict with one another - and let the laughs, gasps, and squirming arise as unexpectedly as the events on the stage.
(67)

In Carr's play, the element of surprise and unconventionality makes the action onstage unfamiliar to the audience, such that the audience might be able to see the kinds of gendered expectations for mothers and children. John Clark also explains that the grotesque usually entails a "violation of harmony, symmetry, and proportion" as well as a tendency toward the supernatural or "macabre" (19). Further, the kind of verbal play in this scene and others bespeaks a kind of black humor characterized by dialogue that highlights the inanity of language (Winston 260).

Mother/Daughter Fertility Feud

Moreover, mother and daughter not only taunt each other verbally but also physically compete to have babies, thus valorizing the role of "Miss Reproductive." They engage in reproductive competition because of Bender's seemingly boundless fertility and Binder's resentment of the continuous baby birthing. Their dialogue enacts the tensions around female fertility: Does motherhood make a woman more womanly? Do youth and fertility define femininity? Ironically, the best evidence of fertility is motherhood, but motherhood stereotypically makes a woman less available sexually and less desirable because of the bodily consequences of pregnancy. By directly confronting these stereotypes in a humorous way, Carr dismantles them and asks the audience to laugh at issues that pose serious problems for many women and couples. Another possible answer to these questions comes later in the play, when Binder criticizes Bender for continuing to have babies, and Bender defends her decision by calling herself an artist: "I am an artist, a bloody genius in fact! Show me the art that is life! You can travel the whole world and nowhere, nowhere will you find it except in the big stretch-marked belly of a woman" (*Low in the Dark* 51-52). This image of a stretch-marked belly, which describes the earthy reality of pregnancy rather than its idealized glow, reaches toward a grotesque form of humor that forces the audience to confront a reality that may be uncomfortable. By claiming that the maternal body is in fact an art form, and that it combines art and life better than other art forms, Bender attempts to raise pregnancy from a biological act to an artistic one.

Pregnancies eventually translate into parent-child conflicts, as Bender and Binder viciously demonstrate. When verbal spars between them become actual blows, these fights lead us to question whether this parent and child can ever have a congenial, nonviolent relationship. In *Low in the Dark*, the parent child conflict centers, rather, on issues of fertility and attractiveness. Similar in content to their first verbal fight about fertility, this time a literal wrestling match occurs when the two women compete for the

same man. This fight, which is a real physical battle onstage, makes literal the fight that some women might like to have with their mothers but would never dare; in Carr's later play *Ariel*, this mother-daughter fight becomes a brutal stabbing. Similar to their earlier argument, they are comparing their bodies and trying to prove whose physique is superior. Binder resents her mother's competition for a man, leading to this exchange:

Binder: [...] You knew he preferred me so you had to move in! Hadn't you?

Bender: Preferred you! The croaky little voice of you with your ostrich eyes and your pancake diddies!

Binder: (*whispers*) Menopause, men o pause, men...o...pause!

Bender: Stop it! (*Starts hitting her.*)

Binder: Menopause, hot flush, empty womb. (78)

In one sentence, Bender compares her daughter to a frog, an ostrich and a pancake. This barrage of insults turns Binder's body into a monstrous conglomeration that negates any sense of sexual attractiveness by defeminizing her body. While Bender claims to be fertile and continues to exhibit fertility, Binder latches onto the sensitive subject of aging and the loss of that fertility in order to torment her mother.

This conflict between two women also concentrates on issues of pride and stereotypically feminine bodily issues: the ability to attract men (being seductive) and the ability to have children (being fertile). These two women want to achieve these ends, and they will not let their mother/daughter bond stand in the way, even if it means wrestling each other for superiority. Fiona Becket observes, "[I]n Carr, then, the effects of the transmission of knowledge through matrilineal channels (underpinned by the mother/daughter model) is both a central feature of women's relationships in her recent plays and a target for devastating irony" (90). Becket's comments emphasize that in conversations about mothering, the exchange of knowledge and the ownership of knowledge tends to occur in women's circles, especially from mother to daughter. While this sharing of advice often represents a tangible bond between mother and daughter, advice can also become cloying and stifling. Although Becket is writing about two of Carr's later plays, her comment applies equally well to *Low in the Dark*, since the irony emerges so strongly from the struggles in the mother/daughter relationship, which is central, in terms of the number of conversations they have, their conflicts, and their care for the babies. In support of Becket's claim, this relationship also contains the most grotesque and most humorous fights about fertility issues. Beyond the humorous aspect of these fights, woman wrestling matches serve another purpose since female wrestling is recognized as a particularly arousing form of entertainment for men. Ironically, while the two women wrestle over their power to attract men, the act of wrestling itself places them in a sexually charged position. These double entendres characterize the mother/daughter

relationship in this play. On one hand, Carr does indeed satirize women's relationship, but these relationships increasingly, in later plays, become fraught with resentment for past wrongs and tangled in mixed motivations.

Gender-Bending/ Relations and Role Playing

While Bender and Binder continue their fertility feud throughout the play, other characters engage in role plays and relationships that simultaneously undermine gender stereotypes in language and make the body an increasingly ambiguous site of gender identification. Bone and Baxter's role-plays resemble Beckett's great stage couples of Hamm and Clov as well as Vladimir and Estragon who tend to exist in antagonistic yet interdependent relationships in which they try to pass the time by talking about whatever comes to mind. While Carr's pairs are similarly antagonistic and funny at times, her characters instead focus their role plays on romantic relationships and gender roles in those relationships. Bone and Baxter take turns at assuming the male role or the female role so that they both get equal chances to perform male or female activities, like building the wall or knitting. Both of them seem to relish the female role more and to be obsessed with learning the mannerisms and thought patterns of women. This fascination with women and willingness to take on the female role immediately overturns the traditional gender roles of the patriarchal family, in which the man must be the breadwinner and the woman must leave her work after marriage to keep the home. By volunteering to take the female role, these men are opting out of the positions that carry economic and social power. Ironically, their stereotypically male names make their female mannerisms even more obvious: the name Bone quite humorously alludes to erections, and Baxter typifies a formal-sounding male name.

Contrary to his name, Bone steals Binder's tampons and takes one of her birth control pills at one point. Their actions tend to fetishize pregnancy and the trappings of menstruation, which are usually taboo and avoided by men in popular representation. Bone's actions even display jealousy of pregnancy and perhaps the fear of not being able to bond with a child in the same way as the mother. Their conversations often address conventional situations, like the woman's pregnancy and the man's salary, and they do so while enacting gender-specific activities and displaying gendered props.

In their first extended role-play, they begin by playing at a heterosexual relationship in which one of them plays the man and the other the woman. When they enter, initially they appear as a married couple, with Baxter enacting the pregnant wife. Their discussion revolves around typical gender roles even as their actions focus on physical signifiers of gender: Bone discusses building the wall while Baxter knits. Throughout the play, building and knitting are the two signature gender activities for every couple, with the increasingly long scarf (twenty feet long) serving to hold

the couple together like a giant umbilical cord; one person wears the scarf as the other person continues to knit it. This umbilical cord metaphor carries through to many of the interactions in the play, since the cord both gives life and must be cut in order to separate mother from child. When a mother/son relationship, in particular, seems too stifling, people often speak of “cutting the cord” to force the child toward independence and to release the mother’s dominating grasp. Here, the scarf links two people in a romantic relationship or role play, and it seems to make them one continuous organism, perhaps codependent rather than merely symbiotic.

Moreover, when Bone and Baxter shift the conversation to talking about Bone’s new girlfriend, who is actually Binder, a new fascination with women’s clothing and mannerisms emerges, making it difficult to tell whether they simply like women or want to be women. This scene introduces their method of referring to their girlfriends by articles of clothing rather than by their names: for example, Pink Sock, Blue Slip, and Necklace. McMullan writes, “[I]tems of costume such as pink socks become signifiers of gender which can be exchanged between male and female characters” (43). In the case of Binder playing the role of Pink Sock, Bone saves her pink sock and treats it as a cross between a reminder and a fetish: he washes it, dries it, irons it, and carries it with him. The pink sock could also be associated with a condom, which makes it function doubly as a female signifier and a male signifier. The conversation about the pink sock and Baxter’s attempts to try it on makes this scene a humorous example of crossdressing mixed with obviously phallic references.

Baxter: Can I, eh, can I try it on?

Bone: It won’t fit, I tried it already.

Baxter: Small foot?

Bone: Tiny.

Baxter: (*trying on the sock*) Describe her?

Bone: Ah, Baxter, don’t! You’ll stretch it!

Baxter: I let you try on the blue slip!

Bone: But it fitted! [...] Look you’re ruining it! (He *takes it off Baxter’s foot.*) I’ll have to wash it again now, your big ugly foot mark all over it!

Baxter: There was a time you were very glad to have this big ugly foot for company! (*Low in the Dark 22-23*)

Although this exchange is ostensibly about a heterosexual relationship, the association between foot and penis makes the image of Baxter putting a small pink sock on his large foot and Bone pulling it off a homo-erotically charged moment. This cross-dressing episode suggests Estragon’s routine of removing his boots in *Godot*, but it also reveals a hint of jealousy on Baxter’s part. He does not want Pink Sock to replace him in Bone’s life. After this exchange, they practice walking like Pink Sock and moving their wrists like her; later on, they even discuss the virtues of different bras.

Coming from the privileged male position, these experiments may seem like a deliberate mock of female roles. By playing on the humor of cross-dressing and drag, however, this scene undermines the male gender traits of these characters and makes their gender malleable, foreshadowing their later pregnancies. At the same time, the childlike quality of their interaction blurs the line between dress up and drag so that the intentionality of their actions is unclear. Their fascination with women's things feeds into their role-plays with each other, which could be read as a series of flirtations. This fascination, on the other hand, makes them more attracted to the women themselves, thus suggesting that their sexual preferences may not be fixed. Either way, the men's activities do not stay within a single paradigm for masculinity or heterosexuality.

Bone and Baxter also engage in role-playing in which they pretend to be a heterosexual couple. Through these role-plays, they are given the opportunity to speak "like" women or "as" women, revealing that speech patterns and topics associated with women can be transferred to men, even as pregnancy itself becomes a male phenomenon. The first role-play between Bone and Baxter quickly degenerates into a row, when Baxter (the wife) deviates from their typical script and suggests that Bone (the man) get two jobs. What makes this fight clever is the alternation between B-movie romantic dialogue in their "couple" roles and the characters' interjections as themselves. While Bone wants to "finish the scenario," Baxter (the wife) has decided to end the role-play deliberately in the most annoying way, by repeating everything Bone says. By inserting this role-play and consciously breaking it up, Carr satirizes these gender roles even as the characters want to cling to them. Baxter's (the wife's) main complaint is, "[W]omen don't talk like that!", so he seems at first to be defending women from his standpoint as the wife in the roleplay. Immediately, though, he explains that "[T]hey just talk, they never stop and there's no sense in anything they say, ever!" (*Low in the Dark* 19), which reinforces a stereotype of women's nonsensical, babbling conversational style. Rather than didactically resolving the situation in a way that instantiates new gender roles, Carr deliberately undermines every attempt at essentializing. Just when the audience expects a coherent explanation for how women talk, the character falters and falls back on an even more limiting explanation that accuses women of speaking nonsense. Since the characters cannot explain what they mean, the audience may begin to see the difficulty in articulating any universal statements about gender and to see how gender lingers in speech even when the speaker is a man pretending to be a woman.

In an article about gender relations and female subjectivity in Carr's plays, Maria Kurdi explains, "[U]nderscoring the social constructedness, performativity and inherent ambiguity of the most widely accepted gender

roles, the unfolding chain of reversals shows the ‘normal’ in the cracked mirror of gender divisions” (60). If mirrors are a central part of constructing self-identity, the metaphor of the cracked mirror shows that images of gender identities may be skewed and false from the start, thus questioning the arbitrary nature of gender divisions. A cracked mirror may also duplicate an image, suggesting a kind of reproduction, such as the plethora of babies onstage.

Their next role-play involves alternating roles to demonstrate how children often become pawns in their parents’ relationship problems. First, Bone plays the woman while Baxter plays the man, then they alternate and Baxter pretends to be Bone’s girlfriend, Pink Sock. In the first instance, their role-play reinforces traditional gender roles of the working man coming home to his wife, who is painting her nails. The role play almost dissolves when the two have an argument about why Bone (the woman) is wearing a particular dress; Baxter (the man) insists that Bone say “she” is wearing it in order to please Baxter. This detail only accentuates the association of gender roles with physical signifiers, since Baxter assumes a good wife would naturally wear a dress purely to please her husband rather than herself (*Low in the Dark* 40-41). The second scene turns sour because Pink Sock (Baxter) wants a baby and Bone feels trapped by the relationship, which leads to an argument about how the couple would break up. Bone wants Pink Sock (Baxter) to fight for the relationship and to claim that she cannot live without him, but Baxter will not play the role of the plaintive girlfriend or make the effort to keep the relationship alive. The early recourse to pregnancy in their role-play ties this episode into the prevalent maternity trope in the play, echoing Bender’s earlier letter to the absent father and rehearsing a stereotypical male excuse for not having a baby: the fear of commitment. Since some couples resort to having a baby in order to give them a reason to stay together, that idea carries the connotation of desperation as well.

When Bone and Binder both get pregnant eventually, they also engage in roleplay scenarios, such as Binder imagining what it would be like to confront a man she had gotten pregnant. In this reversal, she mimics and overturns a typical pregnant girlfriend conversation in which a girlfriend must confess to her boyfriend that she is pregnant. In this twist on the scenario, Binder is an unsympathetic girlfriend who accuses her pregnant boyfriend of infidelity and then grudgingly accepts his pregnancy but makes no promises to help or support him through it.

Binder: And who’s the mother,’ I’d say, kind of harsh... [...]
 ‘Need you ask,’ he’d say and the tears would start... [...]
 “OK! OK!,” I’d say, ‘I’ll stand by you for what it’s worth,
 but I’m not promising anything, now dry your eyes. (*Low in the Dark* 47)

In these few lines, Binder raises and overturns several prevalent stereotypes of heterosexual relationships. First, she reminds us that stereotypically if a woman is suspected of cheating, the paternity of her child is called into question and her partner may refuse to acknowledge that child. At the same time, men may cheat with greater impunity because they do not risk becoming pregnant. However, in this case, the man gets pregnant accidentally instead of the woman and must face the suspicion of having cheated. While the man cries and asks forgiveness in a feminized way, the woman responds by taking him back. Instead of immediately forgiving him, as expected from the woman in the relationship, she makes no promises about her future commitments, thus aligning her with a masculine trait.

Added to these reversals, Binder's role play alternates with Bone's directions about how to make perfect buns; for example, he interjects with "so you have to pre-heat the oven ... for fifteen minutes exactly..." (*Low in the Dark* 47). When Bone performs the cooking lesson, he becomes a sort of maternal figure advising a daughter how to cook. In both cases, his role is unusual for the heterosexual relationship he has with Binder, so both partners waffle between stereotypes for the opposite gender. They also skirmish around gendered expectations for the other person, gradually culminating in a flurry of phrases that bring together clashing clichés. Bone and Binder concentrate on what the other can do to show love tangibly through gendered behavior in their relationship. Bone begins: "I want a woman who knows how to love. I want laser beams coming out of her eyes when I enter the room. I want her to knit like one possessed. I want her to cook softly" (48). Carr begins to combine the expected and the unexpected by using part of a recognizable phrase and then finishing it in an unusual way. "Laser beams," for example, sounds more like science fiction than romance, although they also suggest a cartoonish notion of love at first sight across a crowded room. "To knit like one possessed" suggests a form of rampant domesticity; while we might expect instead to love intensely, the idea of being possessed equates knitting with the demonic. Knitting frantically also hints at pregnancies, since knitting often precedes childbirth. Cooking "softly" also misses the mark; graceful women might walk softly or speak softly, but cooking softly usually does not enter the picture. Binder's response is equally puzzling: "I want a man who'll wash my underwear, one who'll brush my hair, one who'll talk before, during and after ... who'll make other men look mean" (48). Binder's responses tend to feminize or emasculate the man by requesting actions that might seem unrealistic, but her responses also provide avenues for intimacy other than sex.

These expectations set out the most conventional, gender-specific desires and goals for the other person. As audience members, we may laugh

and smirk at the same time, as if acknowledging that we secretly want to ask for laser beams or hair brushing but know how unlikely it is that our partner will acquiesce. Part of these feelings might arise from the desire to have a partner who is confident enough to accept roles outside of conventional gender lines, such as washing underwear, but also one who stays within the boundaries enough not to be threatening. Kurdi comments that, “[T]he expectations assume fantastic proportions when expressing the wish to have the other fulfill both a set of conventional roles and perform gender-bending at the same time” (61). These “fantastic proportions” signify both a huge size and a predisposition toward fantasy, meaning that Carr incorporates realistic and fantastic elements in a genre-blurring form. To an extent, the hyper conventionality and gender-bending counteract each other, since the audience can see how ludicrous both extremes can be. By presenting the audience with the opposites of knitting and being possessed, the play elicits both laughter and perhaps discomfort that can make us think about our expectations for partners, mothers, and children.

Parade of Maternity

Bone and Binder’s relationship moves to a more intensive level with their dual pregnancies, which incorporate and reverse many of the gender stereotypes that have been introduced before. For example, Bone claims that “[M]en cry when they conceive,” reversing the earlier platitude, “women cry when they conceive,” that Bender cited when she and Binder were composing their letter (*Low in the Dark* 60). Since the moment of conception is also intangible and hard to pinpoint, the idea of crying when it occurs points to a maternal fantasy of having intuitive knowledge of one’s body. Their actions and props are reversed as well, since Binder now wears the scarf while Bone trails her around the stage, knitting. He then steals Binder’s tampons and birth control pill, after which they swap buns they have made for each other to signify their double pregnancy. One exchange shows the conflation of men’s and women’s roles in their relationship:

Binder: (*catching Bone with tampons*) Bone!

Baxter: Could be worse.

Binder: Bone, they’re women’s things!

Bone: Are they? (*He puts a pill in his mouth.*)

Binder: And so is the pill! Anyway it’s pointless taking it now, you’re already pregnant!

Bone: I took every precaution. [...]

Binder: Did you?

Bone: It was your carelessness and now you take it out on me.

Binder: (*touches her stomach*) And what about your carelessness?

Bone: You begged me for a baby!

Binder: I begged you for one baby, not two! (61-62)

Bone's display of taking a birth control pill and the couple's tiff about dual pregnancies exemplifies a fantastic kind of humor that highlights a lack of knowledge about reproductive cycles; if Bone is already pregnant, why steal tampons and take the pill? Each person blames the other for being careless even though it is impossible to know how Binder could impregnate Bone. As if Bender's babies had not been enough display of pregnancy, Bone and Binder continue this parade of maternity so that Bone can acquire all the feminine trappings of pregnancy, from the pregnant body itself to a disposition for baking and knitting. Bone's pregnancy takes more precedence, as he begins to plan for his child and experiences the common anxieties about childbirth. For example, in the next scene where he appears, he comes onstage in one high heel and one man's shoe, then begins to alternate knitting a stitch and placing a block in the wall (67). This deliberate combination of male and female activities on the split-gendered stage collapses the distinction between gender roles. Interestingly, most of his conversations about the baby happen with Baxter, who once again takes on the role of partner, even though the two are not specifically role-playing. In this way, the process of mothering shifts from a primarily female activity to a primarily male activity, together with the choices and worries that seem to plague women more than men. Carr separates the performance of motherhood from the performance of gender here, thus daring us to take any kind of gendered body or gendered language seriously.

When Bone becomes pregnant, his conversations with Baxter mirror some of Bender's oppressive plans for raising children because he reinforces common gender stereotypes. Their plans again draw on gendered expectations for girls' sexual behavior, like "[h]ow to put lipstick on," "[h]ow to flutter the eyelids," "[h]ow to say no, when she means yes, [a]nd yes when she means no" (*Low in the Dark* 69). Both men accept and want to encourage these flirtatious and stereotypical female behaviors, which are often used as justification for assaults when women are "asking for it." Although presented humorously, this scene carries sinister undertones of endangering a daughter by teaching her behavior that would be misinterpreted. Earlier, Bender labeled her babies according to occupations and planned their lives in prescriptive ways, but here Bone and Baxter are seemingly sabotaging a daughter's behavior. In addition to the implications of this mothering strategy, their plan involves men teaching girls how to be girls, thus reinforcing the arbitrariness of gender traits and the sense that anyone can potentially instill a sense of gendered identity by treating a child a particular way. The idea of men teaching a female child how to apply lipstick and bat her eyelids also introduces another cross-dressing moment, since the men would be temporarily appropriating feminine behavior for the sake of teaching it to a child. This conversation allows men to enter the

realm of mothering, but confirms that all kinds of mothers can be complicit in harming children. Male maternity arises most strangely from Baxter's later tumor-like pregnancy on his shoulder, but by introducing a pregnancy that is both in a male and in an unusual location, pregnancy appears as an illness, suggesting that it is attacking the mother's body rather than gestating a new family member. The body becomes less and less readable, as typically female traits migrate to males and to strange locations.

Bone soon admits that he's thinking about an abortion because he has "a right to choose," to which Baxter replies that "[T]here's a life inside of you! A destiny, all its own" (*Low in the Dark* 79). In most cases abortion was and still is illegal in Ireland ; in order to get an abortion, a woman has to travel to England or elsewhere. They rehearse some of the most conventional positions on abortion, perhaps playing with the idea that men tend to be more active in the anti-abortion movement than the pro-abortion movement. Because these statements come from a pregnant man and his male friend, they not only take abortion out of the normal realm of a "women's issue" but also de-familiarize cliched arguments. In particular, the play undermines the idea that a baby has "a destiny, all its own," since Bender, for example, labels all her children according to their future professions (Doctor, Pope) and raises them accordingly. Having a destiny of one's own also depends on the gender assigned and how that gender is encouraged or enforced, so the idea of a self-determining destiny seems more and more remote. If the audience can laugh at pregnant men taking opposite positions on abortion, the play critiques women having absolute control over their bodies and babies shaping their own destinies.

Juxtaposed with plans to raise children by profession or gender stereotype, a darker, more violent manifestation of mothering occurs between Bender and Baxter when Baxter asks if she is his mother. Bender's long series of children has evidently made her unsure whether Baxter might belong to her. Their process of determining the facts consists of a series of questions, including questions about clothing and toys, but also whether Baxter was the child who beat Bender and whether the beating was deserved. Reversing the idea of a parent abusing a child, this scene introduces the seemingly unlikely possibility of a young child abusing a parent. This reference to violence together with a few similar references in *Curtains'* stories, evokes a sense of absurdity and senseless violence that resonates with Beckett's plays. In *Godot*, for example, Pozzo treats Lucky as a slave by leading him by a rope around his neck, forcing him to carry all the luggage, and berating him constantly. Because of this violence, the limning of tragic and comic makes this play a sort of "body without borders," since it refuses to fit into a neat genre distinction. The intimation of violence between parent and child also coincides with the idea of maternal ambivalence, since Bender's relationship with her babies throughout has alternated between feelings of joy and hate including

possible incest here. Unlike a purely physical slapstick comedy, the humor becomes darker and more grotesque. This relationship, likewise, introduces conflict between parent and child that may have led to physical violence. Even stranger, Bender offers to nurse Baxter at the end of their discussion. This interlude in the play introduces several disturbing facets of motherhood without resolving them, such as abusive relationships and stigmatized attachments (like nursing for too long). During the rest of the play, there is no reference to Bender's relationship to Baxter, so this scene stands out in the episodic nature of the play as a single instance of an adult child/ parent relationship other than Bender and Binder.

The eeriness of this episode extends to Curtains' narratives, which weave throughout the play. Curtains is the most mysterious character in the play: a woman who is continually shrouded in a curtain so that none of her body is visible. In this physically shrouded state, she acts as an orphic storyteller with archetypal stories of men and women experiencing troubling relationships. Her stories undercut the levity of the play by providing simple narratives of lovers' failure to communicate with each other. In a Beckettian twist, Curtains' stories turn the play from comedy toward tragedy and hint at the lack of happy endings, even in the unpredictable world of this play. At the end of Act one, Curtains explains the play's title phrase: "[T]hey agreed to be silent. They were ashamed, for the man and woman had become like two people anywhere, walking low in the dark through a dead universe. There seemed no reason to go on. There seemed no reason to stop" (*Low in the Dark* 59). Like the fallen Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden, the man and the woman must keep walking although they have lost their idyllic home. At the heart of this play, underneath the layers of role play and physical comedy, Carr introduces the tragedy of "desperation not sung at all" (59). Finally, words have failed to express the feelings, wishes, and thoughts of the couples so that there is always an irrevocable break between them.

The play nevertheless ends with one of Curtains' stories, in which she asserts that the man and woman "had never met. And worse still, they never would, they never could, they never can and they never will" (*Low in the Dark* 99). These failed relationships contribute to the enactment of childbirth and raising children in grotesque, farcical ways, thus making the overarching message of the play more pessimistic and more visceral. The most Beckettian moment in the play, a conversation about the birthing process, emphasizes that the hardships of life begin with birth and blames the mother for this pain. This moment also transforms the earlier conversation about babies having a "destiny all their own" into a pessimistic consideration of a painful existence. Bone admits,

I was a natural birth. From paradise I came, through the chink, to this galaxy of grief. I'll never forget it and I'll never forgive her for it. Purged from the womb, jostled down the long passage, umbilical cord around me neck, the grunting, the groaning, the blood, the shit, the piss, and the first scream, there was no point of return. A rough start to a rough journey I tell you. I wouldn't wish life on my worst enemy, I'll have an abortion.

Baxter: We're all abortions, some later than others, that's all.

[...] (*Low in the Dark* 80)

This passage, more than any others, resonates with Beckett's "birth through shit" mantra and his bleak view of the "accursed progenitor" who brings us into the world (*Endgame* 9). Like Mouth's startling "out ... into this world" in *Not I* and Vladimir's observation that we're "born astride the grave" in *Godot*, Carr reminds us that being born only sets in motion a potentially painful life. *Low in the Dark* shows a debt to Beckett even as they playfully satirize gender conventions in more direct ways than Beckett's plays do. As a playwright in Beckett's legacy, Carr gradually found a different voice and continues to struggle with the relationship between the material body and gendered language to engage her audience.

Performativity and the Audience

Pellegrini highlights the power of performance and its positive ability to attract the audience's attention. She writes, "[I]n performance studies there have been animated discussions about the burden and possibilities of "the live" and about the capacity of performances, live and otherwise, to intervene in and perhaps reimagine the social. Arguably, an individual performance's power to break into, interrupt, the fabric of the everyday derives in part from its affective reach, its capacity to move us, for better and for worse, in ways we could not anticipate" ("A Forum" 114).

Theatre's power lies in its ability to uncover and make visible the social wounds that might otherwise lie hidden. Many of theatre scholar's comments also help us to see how theatre can be an effective method for revealing injustice and sparking a different vision of society. Dolan contends, "[I]f our imaginations can lead us to profound, performative empathy, I believe ever more strongly that the space of performance must be harnessed to imagine love instead of hatred, to create hopeful fictions of meaningful lives instead of senseless deaths" ("A Forum" 106). By emphasizing the power of performance to impact the audience, Dolan asks us to realize theater's transformative potential. Bob Vorlicky amplifies this idea by arguing that theatre should be on the forefront of social change. He explains, "likened to the role it occupied during the classical period, contemporary theatre can take a critical lead in this infant century to create stories, pictures, gestures, sounds, lights, and movement that will keep us active intellects, imaginative artists, and courageous citizens, as we provide

[locations] for our communities to come together for much needed contemplation and for action of the mind, body, and spirit" (126). As he suggests, theatre can offer a community gathering place that encourages critical thinking and potentially changes behavior.

In a nut shell, the ephemerality of theatre, combined with the varied possibilities for interpreting a play onstage, allows theatre to respond to current events and resonate with contemporary social issues. Just as theatre can serve a social function after tragic events, theater can be just as influential in addressing issues of gendered subjectivity. I have explored *Low in the Dark* in which the relationship between gendered bodies and language has come to the fore, emphasizing the tension between biological and cultural forces that shape embodied subjectivity. Carr takes aesthetic, intellectual, and physical risks in performance to illuminate gendered bodies and gendered subjectivity. Thus not only does *Low in the Dark* reveal a wound, but it also resists and reappropriates bodily and linguistic limits in order to form more empowered visions of female subjectivity.

Conclusion

To conclude, as the theories of gender performance and performativity have developed, they have been applied more widely to novels, films, and everyday life than they have to drama. Therefore, this paper has extended the discourse of performativity to theater, and in doing so, promoted a dialogue between the fields of Drama and Performance Studies. While Butler has argued that the performativity of gender should be examined outside of theater performance, theater can provide us with a more focused lens for studying performativity.

Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark* highlights different modes of performing gender through the representation of the female body which introduces the tension between the body as discursively produced and the lived, phenomenological body onstage. By exploring this tension, the performativity of gender onstage arises from a combination of words, the presentation of tangible bodies and the audience's response to the stage action. Hence, this paper has shown how Carr represents a new genealogy of performance stemming from Beckett's experimental use of the stage and the bodies of the actors. Moreover, it has examined Carr's *Low in the Dark* in order to represent different modes of performance and resistance to constrictive social norms.

المخلص:

الأداء الجنساني في مسرحية "مارينا كار" منخفض في الظلام
أماني محمود الصاوي

تناقش هذه الورقة مسرحية "مارينا كار" منخفض في الظلام فيما يتعلق باهتمامها بالهوية الجنسية. بناءً على تحليلي لكتابات جوديث بتلر حول الجنس والأداء ، أناقش كيف تستكشف كار هذه القضايا في شكل ومحتوى المسرحية. من خلال نمذجة الأسلوب والهيكلي في مسرحية "سامويل بيكت" في انتظار جودو ، تعدّ "كار" الجمهور للعناصر العنثية داخل المسرحية ، بينما تستكشف شخصياتها جوانبها الجنسانية على المسرح وتشارك في سلسلة من العروض العنثية والغير الملموسة. سوف اتناول بالشرح ، إذن ، كيف أن الدور المبالغ فيه وغير الواقعي الذي يلعبه الأبطال يوضح وجهة نظر "كار" حول التعسف والسيولة في أدوار الجنسين ، وكذلك أهمية الأداء في تحديد جنس الفرد. لذلك ، فإن الشخصيات محدودة للغاية بمعنى أنها ليست رجالاً أو نساء ، لكن يمكنها أن تتأرجح بين الاثنين بمجرد ارتداء زوج من الكعب أو استخدام زوج من إبر الحياكة. أنا أزعم أيضاً أن "كار" تستكشف مسألة الأداء الجنساني من خلال العديد من اليات المسرح ، حيث تعرض الوعي الذاتي لما بعد الحداثة في عناصر المسرحية المتعددة في المسرحية. أخيراً ، أناقش أهمية اللغة في المسرحية ، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على استخدام التسمية في تعيين الحالة الجنسانية.

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