

IRISH PENELOPES: REWRITINGS OF THE MYTH IN *THE MIDLANDS TRILOGY* AND *PENELOPE*

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at how the myth of Penelope relates to Marina Carr's Midlands Trilogy and Enda Walsh's Penelope. The analysis of the articulation of Marina Carr's Penelopes serves to approach the questions of the influence of waiting in these women's lives as well as the different types of the resulting immobilization which affect their agency. Secondly, the spatial representation of waiting in her theatre is analyzed to identify the contexts where these processes occur. On the other hand, Enda Walsh's Penelope constitutes a more savage version and his play has been read as "a madcap rewrite of Homer" (Pilný 2013: 219), where the myth is used to interrogate the question of the halt of Ireland as a consequence of the post-Celtic Tiger crisis. Both writers emerged in the 1990's and were part of "a gifted generation of playwrights in contemporary Ireland" (Randolph 2012: 47).

KEYWORDS: Irish contemporary theatre, Marina Carr, Enda Walsh, Penelope, waiting, myth.

PENÉLOPES IRLANDESAS: REESCRITURAS DEL MITO EN LA TRILOGÍA DE LAS MIDLANDS Y PENELOPE

RESUMEN: Este artículo estudia la relación entre el mito de Penélope, la Trilogía de las Midlands de Marina Carr y la obra Penelope de Enda Walsh. El análisis de la construcción de las Penelopes de Marina Carr sirve para abordar cuestiones acerca de la influencia de la espera en la vida de estas mujeres, así como los diferentes tipos de inmovilización que afectan a su independencia. En segundo término, la representación espacial de la espera en el escenario es analizada para identificar los contextos en los que estos procesos tienen lugar. Por otro lado, la Penélope del autor Enda Walsh constituye una versión más salvaje y su obra ha sido catalogada como "una alocada revisión de Homero" (Pilný 2013: 219), en la que el mito es utilizado para interrogar el parón de Irlanda como consecuencia de la crisis de la época posterior al Tigre Celta. Ambos dramaturgos surgieron en los años noventa y forman parte de "una generación talentosa de autores teatrales en la Irlanda contemporánea" (Randolph 2012: 47).

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teatro irlandés contemporáneo, Marina Carr, Enda Walsh, Penélope, espera, mito.

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1. Introduction

Myths travel in time and contemporary theatre offers new versions of the classical stories where “the dramatist is free to innovate, provided he maintains the invariant core” (Arkins 2010:5). Homer’s Penelope used to go “with her waiting-women to the upper quarters of the palace, then began weeping for Odysseus, her darling husband, till Athene sent down welcome slumber upon her eyelids” (Homer, *The Odyssey*, 9), while, nowadays, in the new Irish rewritings she “sat in front of this big window here, her chin moonward, a frown on her forehead, as if she were pulsing messages to some remote star which would ricochet and lance Robert wherever he was” (Carr 1999: 111) or “sits in that room watching us...doubting that he’s alive maybe...and maybe choosing one of us for love. [...] ...but today her husband returns” (Walsh 2010: 17-18).

The classical Penelope was a wife who willingly waited for her errant husband, refused to marry any other man and was quite naïve. Moreover, she was defined as a dear child by her nurse, wise, faithful and thoughtful by Homer, but also heartless, by some citizens, on the basis that “she had not the grace to keep to the house of her true husband until he came” (Shewring 1980:280). On the other hand, in the episode where they first meet after his long absence, Odysseus calls her wayward and accuses her of having a heart of iron when he returns home and first thinks he is being rejected. Once they are reconciled, she is sent, together with her waiting-women, to the inside of her house again where she is significantly asked to be and behave silent and discreet. Thus, it can be said that the character of Penelope, as a consequence of Homer’s depiction, has been constructed as a woman who “faithfully awaits Odysseus’ return, although pressed to marry one of the many local nobles [...] a model of fidelity, prudence and ingenuity” (Roberts 2007: 546). Pierre Grimal (1986: 354-356) added to the picture and explained the two versions of her marriage to Odysseus. In the first one says how Penelope was given as a reward to her husband for the good advice provided to Tyndereus, while in the second story she constitutes a prize to Odysseus for winning a race. Grimal also brings together other episodes not present in the Homeric text which account for Penelope’s attempt to suicide in the sea and being saved by birds, her affairs with the suitors, her life as an exile after Odysseus banished her, or even being killed by her husband. Robert Graves, on his part, collected references to Penelope as the mother of Pan who “was fathered by all the suitors who wooed her during Odysseus’s absence” (2011: 101), and traced her origins as the daughter of Icarus and a naiad and how “she had been flung into the sea by Nauplius at her father’s order; but a flock of purple-striped

ducks buoyed her up, fed her and towed her ashore” (641). Graves also narrates how Penelope will marry Odysseus’s son Telegonus after he kills his own father and suggests two descriptions for her death: she could have been sent away in disgrace, becoming an exile again, or died peacefully by old age. Both Grimal and Grave’s contributions created more shocking stories about Penelope which will be present in contemporary plays.

It is the aim of this paper to look at how the myth of Penelope has been rewritten in the hands of two of the most important Irish contemporary playwrights, Marina Carr and Enda Walsh, who have addressed the myth from different perspectives and with different intentions. The article examines, first, the Midlands Trilogy, by Carr, made up of *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), where the three female protagonists, The Mai, Portia and Hester, echo the figure of Penelope, specially in their longing for a resolution, but also constitute alternative versions affected by the Irish context. Secondly, *Penelope* (2010), by Walsh, is read in terms of an example of one of the latest versions of Homer’s text which offers a new approach to the myth and interrogates the values of contemporary society. The final conclusions aim at reasserting the modern images of Penelope as well as establishing the relevance of both writers and their contribution to the myth.

2. Marina Carr’s Penelopes

Marina Carr is one of the most prominent Irish contemporary playwrights. Her first plays –*Low in the Dark* (1989), *The Deer’s Surrender* (1990), *This Love Thing* (1991) and *Ullaloo* (1991)– have been regarded as “acts of theatrical experimentalism, absurdist and feminist” (Wallace 2001: 432), and preceded the more successful Midlands trilogy, the name given to *The Mai* (1994), *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), all of them set in the rural Irish Midlands and using Hiberno-English. Carr’s recognition after these plays was materialized in the publication of these works in a first volume of selected plays, *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999). A second volume, *Marina Carr: Plays 2*, which appeared in 2009, confirmed Carr as a remarkable contributor to theatre in Ireland. This included *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000) and *Ariel* (2002), which constituted her goodbye to the Midlands; *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006), about how we deal with death, *The Cordelia Dream* (2008), a revision of the Shakespearian character out of her collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and *Marble* (2009), a depiction of modern characters with classical

anxieties are also part of this volume.¹ Most recently, Faber and Faber has released *Marina Carr: Plays 3* (2015) which shows that Carr continues writing extensively for theatre. The collection groups *Sixteen Possible Glimpses* (2011), where the play pictures conversations with Chekhov, *Phaedra Backwards* (2015), a retelling of the myth, *The Map of Argentina* (2015) about love, *Hecuba* (2015) about the Trojan queen; and *Indigo* (2015), which revolves around the topic of spiritual creatures in the folkloric and mythological realms. In 2016 Carr adapted Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* for the stage and wrote, together with Emma Donoghue, Joseph O'Connor, Frank McGuinness, Thomas Kilroy, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Hugo Hamilton and Rachel Feehily *Signatories*, featuring the thoughts of those who signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.

Critical engagement with her theatre has reflected the increasing interest her work has raised throughout the years, which has been abundant, especially among Irish scholars. Anthony Roche (1995) studied *The Mai* and related it to Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, and Frank McGuinness also acknowledged Carr by including *Portia Coughlan* in the compilation *The Dazzling Dark: New Irish Plays* (1996). Academics such as Clare Wallace wrote about the inevitable and the use of tragedy in Carr (Wallace 2000, 2001, 2003) and Anna McMullan and Cathy Leeney (2003) coedited *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "before Rules was Made"*, a volume entirely dedicated to her theatre. Later on, Rhona Trench authored *Bloody Living: the loss of selfhood in the plays of Marina Carr* (2010), where she explores the nature of self-destruction in Carr's theatre, and Melissa Sihra, professor of Drama at Trinity College, has shown a special interest in the work of Carr writing extensively about her plays (Sihra 2000, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2008, 2009). Sihra's research includes interviews with Carr, studies of the reception of her theatre in the US and a focus on the female voices and their anxieties within the contexts of family and home. Especially significant for the purpose of this paper have been the references to Carr in volumes devoted to the study of Irish retellings of Greek myths such as *Amid our Troubles: Irish versions of Greek Tragedy* (2002), where Eamonn Jordan contributed with "Unmasking the myths? Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* and *On Raftery's Hill*", describing her characters as being "full of unrealizable longing" (Jordan 2002: 243), or *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today* (2005), where Melissa Sihra authored "Greek Myth, Irish Reality: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*...". *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy*

1. *Mármol* (*Marble*) has been translated by Marta I. Moreno and Antonio C. Guijosa, and directed by Antonio C. Guijosa, and is now on tour in Spain.

(2010) deals with Carr's loose adaptations of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in *Ariel*, and Euripides' *Medea* in *By the Bog of Cats...*, and *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama* (2016) has included Fiona Macintosh's chapter entitled "Conquering England: Ireland and Greek Tragedy", where, again, references are made to Carr's revisions of myths. The study of Irish Penelopes in her plays intends to constitute an addition to this corpus as well as a contribution to make Carr better known for Spanish scholarship.

2.1. The Mai

Marina Carr's admiration for the classics is partly based on her belief that there were exceptional writers who would be necessary in this contemporary era where heroic traits have ceased to exist in favor of trivial behaviors. Classical dramatists are for her,

These warriors of the desk, these songstitchers, these myth finders, [who] while scaring you with their formidable gifts, do also bolster the heart, especially in this anti-heroic age where the all-consuming intellectual pursuit seems to be that of demystification. (Carr 1998: 191)

When *The Mai* (1994) was awarded the Irish Life Festival Choice for the best new Irish play in the Dublin Theatre Festival of 1994, it was said to center on "a 40-year-old woman struggling to save her marriage and safeguard her family's happiness" (*The Irish Times* 1994: 4). Other reviews of the play in that same year started to see more clear links to Penelope's story and Michael Coveney, for instance, read the same performance as an occasion where "the heart sinks at the sight of *The Mai* [...] mooning around her new Connemara house" (Coveney 1994: 78). On the other hand, Fintan O'Toole considered this first performance of the play as a great contribution from Carr to the new generation of Irish theatre that was finding a space in that time, and describes the Mai as a woman "whose foundations are undermined by her love for her faithless husband" (O'Toole 1994: 10), linking the fall of the Mai to her excess of loyalty. By 1996 reviews of the play outside Ireland made reference to Marina Carr as "all the rage in Ireland" (Klein 1996: 27), while the Mai was perceived as a wife in waiting living surrounded by multigenerational pain in her "opulent house, which she built to lure Robert [her husband] back" (27). Cathy Leeney, on her side, related the play to Demeter and Persephone's story (2002) and, very recently, the Mai has been said, again, to bear "traits of Dido and Penelope" (Rapetti 2014: 248).

The play is the story of five generations of women in the Connemara region of Ireland whose lives seem doomed to eternal repetition. The Mai waits there for her husband, who left years ago in pursue of his dreams. In the meanwhile, all her efforts have been devoted to the building of a house where her family life could be reconstructed from scratch. When Robert returns, the Mai realizes her dream will never be fulfilled as her husband has other aspirations in life. Thus, she and the female side of her family embark on a series of discussions about their past, present and future, creating a picture of women struggling to escape the limits imposed by their immobilization. Despite the fact that their stories are not told chronologically, a reorder of the events allows to identify a pattern of repetition of Irish Penelopes with errant husbands within the familial context. The Duchess, Grandma Fraochlan's mother, was abandoned by her husband who promised to come back to take them away to a palace that he got in Spain and, consequently, Grandma became a Penelope in her childhood as she "watched on the cliffs every day for the Sultan of Spain. And at the end of every summer the Sultan would not have arrived" (Carr 1999: 169). Actually, she also was a Penelope in her adult life when she married the nine-fingered fisherman who died leaving her with "a yearning for all that was exotic and unattainable" (116). After her, Ellen, the Mai's mother, got married to a man she did not really love because of her pregnancy. He also left her "to rot in Fraochlan" (145). Ellen was "way ahead of her time" (117), a woman who was expected to go to university to study medicine, but who had to stay immobile as a Penelope because "what else could she do, it was nineteen thirty-eight" (117) in Ireland. On her side, the Mai leaves college to marry Robert and the play opens with their reunion after his return. Her daughter, Millie, tells how the day Robert left The Mai she sent her to buy "a needle and thread" (110) and from that very moment the Mai "set about looking for that magic thread that would stitch us together again" (111), echoing Penelope's weaving. Millie herself is the last woman from this family tree who suffers abandonment, in her case from a married man, who does not want to recognize their child either, and who cannot escape a Penelopean story of repetition.

By reading the different processes of immobilization which affect the women of the play it is also possible to identify the influence of waiting in their lives. If, in the first place, attention is paid to physical lack of mobility, this is sometimes articulated through the use of symbolical objects that cause this paralysis: this is the case of Grandma Fraochlan and the oar she always carries with her as the only thing she has left from her dead husband, who died in the sea and was a fisherman. The funny scene where she and the rest of the women of the family struggle to enter the oar into the Mai's house acts as an example of how men in

the play paralyze women in many senses, even after they have disappeared from their lives. Robert has stopped The Mai's professional anxieties when he ended her career as a musician and, before her, Ellen had to give up Medicine to raise her children since she accidentally became pregnant. Fighting this immobilization is problematic, although women try to do so through their ability for storytelling and fantasy. However, they do not succeed and show their "chronic inability to imagine freedom" (2001: 435). Millie, for instance, tells exotic stories to take the women of the house far away from Connemara. She rewrites and adds interest to Grandma Fraochlan's origin as "the result of a brief tryst between an ageing island spinster and a Spanish or Moroccan sailor" (Carr 1999: 115) and describes her as having an "ancient and fantastical memory" (121). Act two starts with Millie telling the story of the Mai and the little Arab princess she had once worked with in a hairdressing salon the summer before Robert returned. Millie compares them as "two of a kind, moving towards one another across desserts and fairytales" (153). The fantastic also is present through ghostly figures such as Grandma's dead husband, Tomás, drowned sixty years ago and sometimes the stories told by women are white lies used in their attempt to escape their tragic destinies: Beck, the Mai's sister, pretends to be younger and have a good job in front of her new husband not to lose him. Despite all these efforts to escape reality, talking and inventing these tales does not alleviate the women's suffering since storytelling makes them "long for something extraordinary to happen" (163) that actually will never take place in the end.

Odysseus's counterpart, Robert, does not have a story of great deeds to justify his travels -he confesses he hasn't finished anything he might be proud of-. He is not allowed to speak a lot and is accused by Grandma Fraochlan of being the representative of all men who abandoned women as "we repeat and we repeat, the orchestration may be different but the tune is always the same" (123). In this sense, the play has been seen as a "reversal of the Odysseus wanderings viewed from the perspective of Penelope" (Wallace 2001: 438) as Carr chooses to elicit Robert's deeds to focus on the women who have been left behind and the lives and expectations they had in the meanwhile, in their waiting.

Spatial representations of waiting add information to understand women's position. In this case they are the house and Owl Lake. Her home was the Mai's great endeavor, created as a place for illusion and family life, only to end up constituting her prison and being "dark, formless [...] the kind of house you build when you've nowhere left to go" (Carr 1999: 158). Moreover, within the house there is a lack of female solidarity which contributes to the isolation of women: When Beck, the Mai's sister, comes back home after being travelling around the world, her aunts, defined as the bastions of Connemara, arrive at

the house too “armed with novenas, scapulars and leaflets on the horrors of pre-marital sex” (135), convinced that it is their job to control their nieces, to stop them from moving too far away from their authority. The home, traditionally the safest place for women, will end up being a prison where the Mai feels she has no ground under her feet.

The lake, on the other side, which is said to have damaged air, acquires a mythological scope by the *dindseancha* attached to it, which echoes Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

Millie Owl Lake comes from the Irish, *loch cailleach oíche*, Lake of the Night Hag or Pool of the Dark Witch. The legend goes that Coillte [The Mai], daughter of the mountain god, Bloom, fell in love with Bláth [Robert], Lord of all the flowers. So away she bounded like a young deer, across her father’s mountain, down through Croc’s Valley of Stone, over the dark witch’s boglands till she came to Bláth’s domain. There he lay, under an oak tree, playing his pipes, a crown of forget-me-nots in his ebony hair. And so they lived freely through the spring and summer, sleeping on beds of leaves and grass, drinking soups of nettle and rosehip, dressing in acorn and poppy. One evening approaching autumn Bláth told Coillte that soon he must go and live with the dark witch of the bog, that he would return in the spring, and the next morning he was gone. Coillte followed him and found him encosed in the dark witch’s lair. He would not speak to her, look at her, touch her, and heartbroken Coillte lay down outside the dark witch’s lair and cried a lake of tears that stretched for miles around. One night, seizing a long-awaited opportunity, the dark witch pushed Coillte into her lake of tears. When spring came round again Bláth was released from the dark witch’s spell and he went in search of Coillte, only to be told that she had dissolved. (Carr 1999: 147)

This place, at the same time that anticipates the Mai and Robert’s own history, hints again at the weight of the past in the present, the topic of eternal repetition and, thus, the immobilization of the (hi)stories. Millie confirms this negative description of the site as an encapsulation of paralysis when she defines it as a “caul around my chest to protect me from all that is good and hopeful and worth pursuing” (184). At the end of the play, the death of the Mai in the lake, and Millie saying that she has not been able to escape the same destiny as her mother, confirm that immobilization of the women of the play has not been resolved, and that the generations of Irish Penelopes within this family will continue to exist.

2.2. *Portia*

Portia Coughlan was, ironically, commissioned by the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin, and first produced in the Peacock Theatre of Dublin in 1996.

Although the play has been linked to the myths of Antigone and Electra (Rapetti 2014), said to be based on *The Oresteia* (Scherer 2015), related to the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris and the story of Byblis and Caunus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Jordan 2002: 260), it can also be read in terms of the Penelopean figure. Portia lives in the Belmont Valley with her husband and children, and shares her life with her parents, aunt, grandmother, friends and a lover. She married at seventeen and had three boys. She feels she has been wooed into motherhood by her husband and, as well as all the female protagonists from the Midlands trilogy, she is also waiting for a return and immobilized by her past since she is haunted by a dead twin brother who died fifteen years earlier and who constantly ghosts her.

Women's halt in the play is again caused by men: Portia's father forced her to give up college and to marry Raphael and, since then, Portia has felt lonely "stuck here for all eternity" (Carr 1999: 200). Raphael also tries to stop her through familial bonds, although Portia defiantly reminds him that: "it hasn't worked" (221) and warns him, echoing Medea, that when she looks at her children she sees knives. The errant Odyssean figure is symbolized here through her close connection with her lost brother, Gabriel, with whom she shares a link since they were born coming "out of the womb holdin' hands" (211) and Portia feels "you're either two people or you're no one" (241). When Portia and Gabriel were severed he promised her to "come back and keep comin' back until I have you" (250), and, since then, she has had a "mourning of his loss and hunger for their togetherness" (Wallace 2001: 446) becoming a haunted Penelope and escaping from home into the banks of the river and the bar of the High Chaparral.

At home she stands "there, drinking, lost-looking, listening to Gabriel's voice" (Carr 1999: 193) in a house that is "creakin' like a coffin" (207) and where she feels she "can't breathe any more" (207), echoing the Mai's feelings of imprisonment. The banks of the river Belmont are the place where she longs for Gabriel to come back and take her with him: the space for waiting is here linked to the place where the awaited ones disappeared, where Portia reckons she will be coming back forever. Finally, the bar is the place where she looks in vain for suitors who can alleviate her pain. As it happened in *The Mai*, landscapes constitute jails, and the Belmont Valley plays the same role the Owl Lake did: if the lake was damaged, the valley is "the dungeon of the fallen world" (219) and the dindseancha this time tells a story of a witch rejected by her community and saved by the god Bel, when the river was born. Again, the legend acts as a premonition of what will happen to Portia, who is considered dark and different by the others, and who will finally be reunited with her true love, Gabriel, in the river Belmont. The lake, the water, which also had relevance in Grimal and Graves's Penelopean

episodes, becomes the element through which the separated ones achieve reunion again as Portia ends up drowning herself in the river.

Portia can be said to echo the classical Penelope, since she is imbued in a process of waiting for the return of her real love, embodied here in the figure of her brother, and also because she waits for a resolution to her empty life. However, she represents a different depiction in the sense that, while the Homeric character and the Mai were caring mothers and wives, Portia is, from the beginning of the play, a woman who refuses to accept the burdens of a society that considers women are supposed to be content at home. In this play, Carr includes more spaces, such as the river or the bar, where we can see the real Portia, signaling that the home is not any longer the place for realization of women. Portia is more determined and courageous, unafraid of the consequences of being different or a new version of the myth, although, again, her tragic ending might suggest the (Irish) society still rejects these characters.

2.3. *Hester*

To the Bog of Cats I one day will return,
 In mortal form or in ghostly form,
 And I will find you there and there with your sojourn,
 Forever by the Bog of Cats, my darling one. (Carr 1999: 262)

By the Bog of Cats... tells the story of Hester Swane, an Irish tinker who is stuck in a bog of Offaley and suffers the loss of Carthage, her husband, who leaves her, after fourteen years together, to marry a wealthier and younger girl from the community where they live. It was first premiered in 1998 at the Abbey Theatre and reviews of this first performance of the play made reference to the Greek echoes (Nowlan 1998: 14), evoked through the mysterious setting of the bog. Also, some characters, such as the ghost fancier who predicts the future, resemble the chorus in the classical tragedies. Hester is defined as a woman who is “deprived and trapped and doomed” (Nowlan 14). The play has been related to the myth of Medea² (Wallace 2001, Arkins 2002, Nightingale 2004, Dallat 2005), but, within this scope, Hester can also be read as a Penelope who longs

2. The play has been said to be “a reiteration of the Medea legend” (Wallace 2001. 139-440) and its protagonist, Hester, as a foreigner and a sorceress (Arkins 2002: 203), has been called the “Irish Medea” (Nightingale 2004: 22), or another “‘barbarian’ in Corinth” (Dallat 2005: 18).

for the return of her vanished mother and whose tragic ending, marked by her bloody revenge, seems to be the logical consequence to her inability to move on.

The play opens with Hester being warned that she will die unless she leaves the bog where she is waiting for her mother, big Josie Swane, to return. But she refuses arguing that “everythin’ I’m connected to is here” (Carr 1999: 273). Her bonds are mainly to Carthage and to her mother, both of whom can be identified with errant characters who left in pursue of their dreams. The connection between mother and daughter -which is present in all three plays from the trilogy: Mai and Millie, Marianne and Portia- acquires a more prominent role in this play: Hester was abandoned when she was only seven, and she has idolized her since then, despite all the negative depictions she gets from the community about her. Josie Swane, “a great wan for the pausin’” (275), is described as a weaver and “the greatest song stitcher ever to have passed through this place” (275). She was often seen “croonin towards Orion in a language I never heard before or since” (294). She ran off, leaving Hester behind and asking her to wait as a Penelope: “And I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I’ll watch her return” (297). It is that remembrance which causes that Hester feels “there’s a longin’ in me for her that won’t quell the whole time” (275) and her inability to move on the grounds of her mother’s promise to come back.

Hester is also linked to Carthage in a particular way: “Our bond is harder, like two rocks we are, grindin’ off of wan another and maybe the closer for that” (Carr 1999: 269), and when she finally understands that their reunion will not take place she enacts her revenge. The effects of waiting and immobilization in Hester are devastating. Called a “Jezebel witch” (280), there are two sides in her, the decent but also the savage, as she herself openly states: “There’s two Hester Swanes, one that is decent and very fond of your callow treatment of me. And the other Hester, well she could slide a knife down your face and not bat an eyelid” (285). Her desperation caused by the longing for a resolution that will never happen results in her transformation into a “big lump of maneness and bad thoughts” (322). When she is reminded of the fact that her mother will not come back, her wild and dark side bursts. After she sets fire to Carthage’s cattle and house she decides to leave eventually; however, Josie’s words will make her change her mind and precipitate the final tragedy when she says: “Mam, I’d be watchin’ for ya all the time ‘long the Bog of Cats. I’d be hopin’ and waitin’ and prayin’ for ya ta return” (338). Hester understands then that her daughter is about to repeat the Penelopean pattern and when she kills her she is trying to prevent this as: “I won’t have ya as I was, waitin’ a lifetime for somewan to retun, because they don’t, Josie, they don’t” (339).

The three female protagonists of Marina Carr's Midlands trilogy show "a compulsion to return, to repeat the past" (Wallace 2001: 440), "a sense of being stalked" (Jordan 2002: 261), which determines their immobilization and relates them to the figure of Penelope. One of the processes through which women have been immobilized in Ireland has consisted in their position in the margins both as literary authors and characters. Carr replaces them in the center by choosing women as the protagonists of her plays, giving them a voice and making that voice an echo of the classical heroines. By telling the stories of different generations she widens the scope of this process. By making their stories subversive she fights traditional roles attributed to women in Ireland. Although these plays have sometimes been read as texts where women have little agency and whose acts of suicide are read as acts of resignation (Wallace 2001), there is also a possibility of reading the suicides as acts of transformation rather than surrender. Her work enters "old myths from new angles" (Randolph 2012: 50) as it has been proved above, and Carr is adding material not included in Homer to make possible the rewriting of the myth within the Irish context and create her Irish Penelopes.

3. Enda Walsh's *Penelope*

If Marina Carr was defined as "the most complicated, confrontational and disturbing writer of the latest generation of Irish playwrights" (Jordan 2002: 243), Enda Walsh has been considered as "a prominent contemporary Irish dramatist with artistic and intellectual vigor" (O'Brien 2011: 646), and a writer in search of the emotional engagement from the audience who has spoken about his characters as "very hard" and having "a real struggle about them" (Walsh in Fitzgibbon 2001: 478). Born in Dublin he has written stage plays, radio plays, screen plays and musicals. His work has been defined as "distinctive. A very particular style and a focus on characters who seem trapped" (473). Among his early plays are *Fishy Tales* (1993), a children's play, *The Ginger Ale Boy* (1995), *Disco Pigs* (1996), which won the Stewart Parker award in 1997, *Sucking Dublin* (1998), written for the Abbey Outreach Department, *Misterman* (1999), and *Bedbound* (2001). These were followed by *The Walworth Farce* (2006), *The New Electric Ballroom* (2008) and *Penelope* (2010) which were enthusiastically received. More recently, *Ballyturk* (2014) has been presented at the Galway International Arts Festival. Walsh has also a filmic production which includes a short film, *Not a Bad Christmas* (2001), and the film versions of *Disco Pigs* and *Hunger*. He was the winner of the Tony Award in 2012 for writing the musical *Once* and in

2015 he co-wrote with David Bowie a new version of *Lazarus*. In the same year he adapted Roald Dahl's *The Twits* and this was followed by *Arlington* (2016), a story about waiting and fate, and *The Same* (2017), about two women who meet and realize they are two versions of the same person.

In 2011 The Enda Walsh Festival was held in The Studio Theatre in Washington D.C. where *Penelope*, *The Walworth Farce* and *The New Electric Ballroom* were presented collectively in order to approach the notion of a *new Ireland*. For the reviewers of the event Walsh's plays highlighted the "menacing inevitability as a kind of contemporary fate from which the characters cannot escape" (O'Brien 2011: 647). His work has most recently been regarded as "baffling and bewildering" (Pilný 2013: 217) and more attention has been demanded to compensate for the lack of academic engagement with his work (Wallace 2017), which contrasts with Walsh's presence in theatres in Ireland and abroad confirming his international acknowledgement. Thus, his inclusion in this paper, apart from contributing to the revision of the Penelopean myth in contemporary Ireland, intends to constitute a necessary addition to the scholarly involvement with the playwright.

Carr's woman-centered revision of Penelope achieves modern and savage dimensions in the hands of Walsh. *Penelope* was first premiered in Germany, at Theater Oberhausen in February 2010 and it was later presented in Ireland, America and London from 2010 to 2011. The play was part of a commission by the project Odysee Europe that asked six authors to rewrite Homer's play and to tour the resulting performances in Germany between February and May 2010. Action takes place in a tiny Greek island where four remaining Penelope's suitors try to win her love through romantic speeches while she stays above in her palace, completely speechless, as in this play Walsh chooses to give voice to the suitors instead.

There are two spaces, a claustrophobic swimming pool and the crystal space above from where Penelope invigilates her suitors. This "dilapidated swimming pool drained of water" (Walsh 2010: 3) has been the home of Burns, Quinn, Dunne and Fitz for years. There they deliver speeches of love in front of a CCTV camera, which looks down at them and is afterwards projected onto a flat screen Penelope watches impassively as a victorious queen who observes from her throne and who has the power to choose or discard. In addition, the four men wait there for Odysseus to come back and kill them and, like Carr's characters, are stuck in a repetition of events which seems to have no end. This causes violence and absurdist dialogues among them while they wait "frantically yearning to

come up with something that would liberate them from the entrenched pattern of futile wooing” (Pilný 2013: 220). Although they know they will be slaughtered, they dream of how they will be filleted and barbecued by Odysseus, they come back every day to the pool, as they have done for years, to try to escape their destiny. Irony is added when they declare that they could run away but they have sold their boats for beer and they can’t swim either.

Immobilization achieves a new meaning in Walsh’s play. By placing the stress on the four suitors, rather than on Penelope, the playwright constructs an allegory of the immobilization that the country suffered as a consequence of the economic crisis undergone in the post-Celtic Tiger Era. As it has been noticed, (Pilný 2013), their names evoke modern real business men involved in economic scandals in Ireland: Quinn has been identified with Sean Quinn, Fitz with Sean Fitzpatrick, Dunn with Sean Dunne and Burns with Jonny Burns. Characters and names have also been read in terms of puns (Lonergan 2015), and thus Fitz would be the one who better ‘fits’, Dunne is already ‘done’ with many things in life, Quinn would combine ‘Kill’ and ‘win’ and Burns will burst with passion. All of them are fully aware of their entrapment and describe themselves as “the talking dead” (Walsh 2010: 29).

In an apocalyptic scenario they are competitors in a constant fight which is not only physical but also dialectical. The dialogues they display match their conception of themselves as “the mind wavers” (8). Moreover, they medicate themselves and enjoy reading “the classics in particular...the companionship of Homer...” (8), but also other books that speak of investments and devastated economies. Although Walsh considers he does not write about real things (Walsh in Sierz 2008), it is impossible not to identify a political stance and see resemblances with the Irish financial crisis of 2008 in the references to business and economy mentioned. Moreover, very recently, the figure of Penelope in this play has been read as “an unreal figure who might better be conceived of as a sphinx-like personification of the market than as a real woman in any sense” (Wallace 2017: 43), supporting these ideas of the playwright’s political commitment.

Despite all their efforts, the suitors’ speeches do not win Penelope’s heart, suggesting that modern men have an incapacity for romantic love. Penelope is not any longer a woman in waiting but an empowered spectator who tyrannically observes those who long for her. Her appearance occurs for the first time by the middle of the play, only to be described as the beautiful Penelope who “can immediately be seen through the screen, sitting in a seat and watching a large television and the live transmission inside the villa” (24). She is in this play an

object of desire for men, the repeated topic of their dialogues, the evidence that love and change are not possible, and, in broader terms, that “human history needs to be seen in cyclical rather than linear terms” (Lonergan 2015: 142) and that the crisis presented in the play is not different from other crises that have happened before in other contexts. Also, the play shows to what extent humans pursue and wait for a resolution even when they know they cannot be successful. Dunne makes his plea universal when he asks for a reward for his longing: “I am claiming this house for the years of longing...of waiting...for the ‘what ifs’ and ‘maybes’. Do you not recognize my past?” (28). When the waiting becomes excessive, madness seems to invade the suitors, and, as it happened with Carr’s characters, men lose rationality, question Penelope’s existence and become “eaten by madness” (30). In a final outburst they are able to identify their object of desire and longing as love, “this all-consuming love” (36). They refuse then to live in the actual world and choose to continue with their fight breaking the bonds of brotherhood among them. The final cross-dressing scene when they stab Quinn and all of them die burned suggests again that there is not resolution for waiting, but also that the search for love demands blood sacrifices and that contemporary men have forgotten how to achieve it. The play ends with Penelope turning and looking “offstage and into her new future” (51), a future which will bring, without any doubt, new versions of *herstory*.

4. Conclusions

This paper has shown how the Midlands tragedies of Marina Carr echo Penelope. The different types of immobilization can be seen within the familial contexts provided in each case, both horizontally, through the examination of the lives of the three protagonists, and vertically, through the different generations and stories of repetition depicted. The spaces where these Irish Penelopes are placed identify new images of the traditional Irish home which deconstruct it to create new meanings of it such as, for instance, the house as a dangerous set for women. In this same fashion, Enda Walsh rewrites the myth in the form of a play with the suitors in the main roles as businessmen trapped in a suffocating space where an all-powerful and cold-blooded Penelope watches from her throne the decadence of the modern society, symbolized in these men unable to produce a love speech that softens her heart.

Both Carr and Walsh’s wide production so far, together with the relevance of the themes they address in their theater, support the idea of a gifted generation

of Irish playwrights that could constitute a current theatrical revival, following O'Toole's classification of the Irish contemporary theatre (2000: 47-59). While Carr is nowadays fully acknowledged as a remarkable playwright, there is still a deficit in scholarly interest as regards Walsh and his works (Wallace 2017: 35) which this article has intended to solve. The study of other Irish versions of the myth of Penelope, such as Maciek Reszczyński's rewriting (1988) set in Northern Ireland, or the approach to other Greek myths in the hands of Irish playwrights such as *Medea* by Brendan Kennelly (1988), Kenneth Mcleish (2000) or Robin Robertson (2010), offer possibilities of further research within this field.

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