

Past the Lyrical:
Mythographic Metatheatre
in Marina Carr's
Phaedra Backwards

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Abstract

Marina Carr's 2011 play Phaedra Backwards continually exhibits awareness of the mythic and tragic genre conventions governing it. These generic rules simultaneously structure the play and limit the playwright's flexibility to create a new message. This essay argues that Carr's play uses a specific kind of self-referentiality, employing a strategy I am calling mythographic metatheatre. Through its self-awareness as a theatrical representation of a mythological story, Phaedra Backwards calls attention to myth's structuring role in our cultural imaginary by performing a deconstruction of the Phaedra myth. Carr raises questions about how and why people tell culturally sanctioned stories. Without offering concrete answers to these queries, Phaedra Backwards's mythographic metatheatre urges us to consider possible answers without forgetting that any answer is likely to be rooted in the myths that shape our consciousness.

THESEUS. *He had everything to live for.*

PHAEDRA. *Unless the bull pucked him off with his horns, but even that wouldn't be an accident. Or maybe, just maybe the sea came up to meet him, the waves caught hold of his hair, but that's the stuff of lyrics. We're past the lyrical, but was he? [Carr 78-79].*

Almost from the opening line, Marina Carr's 2011 play *Phaedra Backwards* announces its metatheatrical and meta-mythic fascinations. In the epigraph above, Phaedra rejects lyricism. She rejects artistic construction as a way of

seeing herself in the world. As we shall see, Phaedra's self-referential post-mythic status suffuses Carr's drama. The play, which shuffles the order of events in the myth, is permeated with postmodern self-consciousness about the constructedness of myth—the ways in which narrative structures control, delimit, and ostensibly unify disparate events into one meaningful plot structure. First performed at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey, Carr's play highlights an awareness of the mythic and tragic genre conventions governing it. This essay argues that Carr's play uses a specific kind of self-referentiality, employing a strategy I am calling mythographic metatheatre. Mythographic metatheatre builds on the theoretical foundation laid out by Linda Hutcheon, who theorizes the systemic interrogation of history-as-narrative in postmodern fiction, which she calls historiographic metafiction. In opting instead for the terms *mythographic* and *metatheatre*, I suggest that (1) mythology is constructed through narrativizing techniques comparable to historical narratives, and (2) interrogating this construction through performance introduces a set of epistemological opportunities and problems not present in fiction. *Phaedra Backwards* calls attention to myth's role in our cultural imaginary by performing a self-conscious deconstruction of the Phaedra myth.

The Phaedra myth is recounted in a number of ancient and modern texts, including several ancient plays, Apollodorus's *Library of Greek Mythology*, Ovid's *Heroides*, passing mentions in Homer's *The Odyssey* (11.322) and Virgil's *The Aeneid* (226), and numerous modern plays, novels, films, operas and songs, etc. One of the best-known versions of the myth is Euripides's 428 BCE *Hippolytus*. In Euripides, Hippolytus scorns Aphrodite, so the goddess of love curses Phaedra, his stepmother, to fall madly in love with him. Initially Phaedra is determined to starve to death rather than give in to her passion, but after confessing to her nurse and the chorus, the nurse betrays Phaedra's confidence to Hippolytus. Enraged and disgusted, the young man threatens to reveal Phaedra's secret to Theseus. To prevent this, Phaedra writes a note accusing Hippolytus of trying to rape her, and then hangs herself. When Theseus arrives, he finds Phaedra's body and the note, then exiles Hippolytus and prays to Poseidon to punish his son. A messenger arrives to describe a bull from the ocean attacking and dragging Hippolytus nearly to death. Artemis tells Theseus his son was innocent, and Hippolytus is brought on to forgive his father before dying. This plot is largely followed by Seneca and Jean Racine, who produced the most famous subsequent versions of the play. More will be said about these versions later.

Unlike Seneca and Racine, Carr significantly replots the mythic events. Braided temporal plotlines make a simple plot summary difficult, but this description should help readers unfamiliar with the play to orient themselves.

Phaedra Backwards opens with Hippolytus's death, from the end of the myth. The second scene shifts chronologically backwards to show Pasiphae, Phaedra's mother, setting up a mechanical cow scaffold to seduce her husband Minos's divine white bull. Previous tragedies mention Phaedra's family history, but Carr breaks with her predecessors by actually staging Pasiphae's lust for the bull. Immediately afterwards, the Minotaur makes his first appearance, described in the stage directions as "*From a great distance. Ripping through a dimension*" (84). Throughout the first portion of the show he appears on the fringes, mostly unseen by the other characters. Next, an extended, drunken dinner party develops the primary characters—Phaedra, Theseus, Hippolytus, and Aricia—and their various sexual and interpersonal dysfunctions. Back in Pasiphae's plotline, Minos returns and condemns both his wife and the young Minotaur—her child with the bull—as monsters who should be destroyed. As the tension in Carr's play rises, the time/dimension traveling Minotaur evokes happy childhood memories in an effort to convince Phaedra to kill Theseus as revenge for slaying him. When that does not work, he brings on the spirits of Ariadne (Phaedra's sister and Theseus's former lover), Pasiphae, and Minos, who hang Phaedra and bite chunks out of her body. Phaedra finally agrees to avenge the Minotaur when the spirits threaten her daughter. Seeing her wounds, Theseus asks what happened, and Phaedra's vague answer implicates Hippolytus. Theseus banishes Hippolytus, and the play ends up essentially back where it began: the Minotaur carries the dead body of Hippolytus onto the stage.

Carr is not faithful to any particular iteration of the myth and draws from different versions. Her closest dramatic source is Racine's 1677 *Phèdre*, based on Seneca's *Phaedra*, written around 54 CE. One of Seneca's sources was doubtless Euripides's *Hippolytus* (possibly both Euripides's surviving *Hippolytus* *Stephanephoros* and his now lost *Hippolytos Kalyptomenos*).¹ Additional precursors include modern plays like Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Brian Friel's *Living Quarters* (1977), and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), each of which will be addressed below. Carr also draws on a long history of Irish adaptations from Hellenic drama, myth, and literature. Irish theatre is saturated with Greek adaptations, which has shaped Carr's dramaturgy.²

Metatheatrical and Meta-Mythic Themes

Metatheatrical and meta-mythic references run throughout *Phaedra Backwards*, starting from the opening scene, which begins at the end of the mythic story. Theseus enters, telling Phaedra that his son has died going over a cliff,

immediately signaling to the audience that this is going to be a different kind of Phaedra retelling. Theseus learns the news from an unidentified female messenger, whom he says was viscerally excited to tell of the accident. Phaedra replies, "Well, it is sort of dramatic" and notes, "Some women love giving dramatic news" (78). The self-consciousness of these references points to the fact that we are actually seeing the climactic death of Hippolytus dramatized. The mythic structure is inverted, ironically undercutting the tension of Hippolytus' death. Carr foregoes the series of events leading up to his tragic demise (though she can count on many theatre-going audience members to be familiar with the Phaedra myth).³ Certainly, for Racine, Seneca, and Euripides, Hippolytus' death *is* a dramatic moment, the climax ushering in cathartic release. But announcing his demise in the first scene eliminates any suspense about the youth's fate.

This scene draws attention to the generic conventions of mythology, as seen in the epigraph above. Phaedra's statement/question, "We're past the lyrical, but was he?" raises significant queries about the characters' relationship(s) to their mythic origins and the extent to which those origins continue to shape, guide, and delimit their fates. Phaedra apparently imagines herself as beyond or freed from the lyrical, from the generic conventions of mythology. However, her supposition that Hippolytus could have been killed by a bull—a symbol that will be discussed in more detail—or physically grabbed by the ocean suggests she is still thinking through the symbolic logic of mythology in which supernatural, extraordinary events are treated as everyday occurrences. The question Phaedra asks implies that she and Theseus have, somehow, broken free of the structural constraints of mythology, though in his death, Hippolytus was still bound by those conventions. He died as he was supposed to die, going over a cliff by the ocean. Dying in that prescribed manner becomes evidence that Hippolytus did not escape the strictures of his storyline. Phaedra, on the other hand, in her ironic self-consciousness, is tempted to think herself liberated from the fate mythology has laid out for her.

The play repeatedly returns to the theme of fate, which is fitting for a myth regularly presented as a tragedy. For the Greeks and Romans, myth and tragedy were driven by a sense that human destinies were written by the gods, and there was no escape from fate. In the (post)modern world, however, we no longer take that for granted. In using this theme, Carr echoes Brian Friel's *Living Quarters*, an earlier Irish *Phaedra* adaptation. As Richard Cave argues, the "dreaming back" technique in Friel's play puts his characters in tension with the mythological fate they seem to be trying to escape (106). Particularly the character "Sir"—who shapes the other characters' memories based on an on-stage ledger—suggests the tyranny of the mythological/theatrical source. Phae-

dra raises this very point, longing for the pre-modern capacity to blame the gods for the accidents of one's life:

PHAEDRA. A few thousand years ago we could blame Aphrodite.

THESEUS. For what?

PHAEDRA. For this. For you. I could blame Aphrodite for you or any of those mad medieval saints. The Italians were allowed to whip their statues if they withheld favours... Now I have to take the blame for everything myself. That's the thing I really cannot abide about being modern [88–89].

In pining for the days when the gods or saints could bear blame, Phaedra voices a deeply modern concern about the psychologically detrimental effects of a world stripped of the supports provided by superstition or religious faith.⁴ Whereas in Euripides, Seneca, and Racine, Phaedra continues to be subject to fate, in Carr's version, she has lost that faith in the gods and destiny. She is adrift in a kind of ideological exile from the sources of comfort her previous iterations could draw upon.

Carr's play is ambivalent about the continued power of fate over its characters. On the one hand, Phaedra makes several metatheatrical or metadramatic references, often in talking with Aricia, her rival for Hippolytus's affections. At one point, Phaedra metadramatically critiques Aricia's superficiality: "You have no capacity for suffering. The first wind will blow you away. The only ones who interest me now, who have ever interested me, are those with the scars and still standing" (89–90). The capacity for suffering that Phaedra values so highly is a distinctive trait of tragedy, which runs on an economy of suffering, perseverance, and redemption. For Phaedra, to be a tragic figure is to be worth something. However, to be a tragic hero also means to be governed by fate, a condition toward which Phaedra expresses ambiguity. On the other hand, Theseus maintains faith in the fateful power of the mythic/tragic structure. At one point he describes his marriage to Phaedra as "fascinating bad news, a *doom-eager* pact" (106; emphasis added). In attributing the relationship to *doom*, to fate, Theseus renounces the personal responsibility that weighs so heavily on Phaedra. For him, life is guided by forces beyond his individual control, and the individual choices he makes are not truly free. This may be part of the reason Theseus never expresses any remorse for the brutal killing of the Minotaur, even though he is repeatedly confronted with this guilt throughout the play.

The Minotaur is the other major meta-mythic figure in *Phaedra Backwards*, embodying the symbolic economy of myth. He plays a disruptive role, breaking down temporal boundaries and blurring the lines between identities. The Minotaur is an unconscious archetypal obsession representing suppressed awareness of humanity's animal nature. Ariadne even says, "He was the original nightmare and vision, slipped through eternity's seam" (111). This is essen-

tially how Carl Jung described the archetype. He writes, “The archetype is a tendency to form such representations of a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern ... [Instincts] manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images” (58). In other words, the image of the bull represents a shared cultural anxiety—a characteristic or trait that is simultaneously seductive and terrifying.

The Minotaur represents an unconscious obsession for many of the characters, shaping their self-perceptions and desires. The most obvious example is Pasiphae, mother of Phaedra and the Minotaur. As punishment for Minos—Phaedra’s father—not sacrificing a specific white bull as he had promised Poseidon, the sea god ignited an obsessive desire for the bull in Pasiphae. According to Apollodorus, at her command the Athenian architect Daidalos “built a wooden cow ... [and] made Pasiphae climb inside. The bull came up to it and had intercourse with it as if it were a genuine cow. As a result, she gave birth to Asterios, who was called the Minotaur; he had the face of a bull, but the rest of his body was human” (98). This is depicted in scene two of *Phaedra Backwards*, where we see the Inventor deliver the wooden cow and show Pasiphae how to get inside it. When he questions her motives, Pasiphae tells him, “I’m only doing what women imagine” (82). This dream-like allure and threat of the bull is reiterated in scene six, where the Minotaur encounters the Nanny who cares for Phaedra and Theseus’s daughter:

NANNY. Away with you now to the pastures of the unknown.

MINOTAUR. I bet you dream about me.

NANNY. All women dream of the bull.

Enter Theseus.

MINOTAUR. Yes, and all men too.

NANNY. I said away with you. There is no place for you here.

MINOTAUR. No, and never was [101–102].

This passage reflects both the unconscious processes undergirding the archetype and the impossibility of actually manifesting the traits represented by the bull figure. The horrific paradox of the Minotaur. Dreams are the terrain of the archetype, which both characters acknowledge. Archetypes occupy the phantasmatic space of desires half-realized by the conscious mind. But, as the end of this conversation implies, the archetype has no place in the conscious world—the Minotaur/bull must remain in the misty space of dreams and myths.

Carr is clearly aware of this paradox at the heart of the Phaedra myth, which dissolves the distinctions between individual identities. As Jungian psy-

chologist Marie-Louise von Franz writes, "The Self is often symbolized as an animal, representing our instinctive nature and its connectedness with one's surroundings.... This relation of the Self to all surrounding nature and even the cosmos probably comes from the fact that the 'nuclear atom' of our psyche is somehow woven into the whole world" (220). In other words, the animal archetype reflects an acknowledgment of our connection to nature as a whole, rather than our existing as atomized individuals. This interconnectedness reflects the illusory nature of psychological boundaries separating the Self from the outside world. For Jung and his disciples, the archetype is rooted in the collective unconscious—a shared set of symbols deeply rooted in "primeval dreams and creative fantasies" (Jung 42)—and so an individual unconscious mind, for all its idiosyncrasies, is interconnected with every other human mind through a common repertoire of symbols and images. The animal identification also reflects awareness of humanity's animal nature—a knowledge human beings often attempt to disavow. Phaedra directly invokes the animal nature of humanity when Theseus denies guilt for murdering the Minotaur because he was an animal. Phaedra challenges him: "And you're not an animal? And I'm not? And are we not surrounded by animals? You call the way you live human? This country human? The passions of the upright two-footers human? We're animals. We suffer, we die, we're forgotten" (123). Theseus lives with his conscience because he distinguishes himself from the Minotaur. He sees himself as a human and the Minotaur as an animal, and because a human being weighs heavier in Theseus's ethical scheme, he has no compunctions about slaughtering his opponent.

At the same time, Theseus's interactions with Hippolytus hint at the permeability of these boundaries, the instability of identity categories. He shames Hippolytus for not having achieved great feats, saying, "At twenty I had you. At twenty I'd made my first million. At twenty *I wrestled a bull to the ground*" (121; emphasis added). The bull is external here, an obstacle in the world to be conquered so that Theseus can secure his legacy and prove his potency—defeating the bull is paired with other symbols of masculine potency: fathering children and financial success. However, this seeming externality is soon disrupted. He condemns Hippolytus for not having had sex with Phaedra if that was what he wanted: "If you had fucked her and repented I would've forgiven it, but this girly dithering. I need to see some shadow of the *young bull* in you, some shade of the *bull-slayer* that came down from me" (122; emphasis added). The distinction between the *bull* and the *bull-slayer* is elided. The two figures become opposites which are in fact identical. Theseus and the Minotaur become the monstrous double, which René Girard argues is a fundamental principle of tragedy as a form. In a very basic gloss, Girard claims

that the fundamental violence of tragedy stems from the community's desire to avoid its own violent tendencies by attributing all tension to a single individual, who can be exiled or sacrificed in a collective cathartic effort (8). However, the struggle to identify a sacrificial victim produces a doubling effect, as characters cast about to find the "guilty" party. Principal characters reveal themselves to be fundamentally similar. We see this with the dissolution of the distinction between Theseus as *bull-slayer* and *bull*, a dissolution bringing him precariously close to the Minotaur. As Girard says, "The unity and reciprocity that the enemy brothers have rejected in the benign form of brotherly love finally impose themselves, both from without and within, in the form of monstrous duality—the most disquieting and grotesque form imaginable" (160). While incidental, Girard's reference to the enemy *brothers* is especially apropos for Theseus and the Minotaur because Theseus is Poseidon's son while the Minotaur's father is the magnificent bull sent by Poseidon to Minos, so in a very literal sense, the conflict between Theseus and the Minotaur is a fratricidal one. Beyond this, however, both characters—Theseus and the Minotaur—mirror one another to the point where they become identical in their callous violence.

Theseus is not the only character with whom the Minotaur is twinned. The bull-faced Minotaur is closely associated with both the white bull who fathered him and especially with the sea bull that kills Hippolytus at the end of the myth cycle. After Phaedra finally confronts Theseus about killing the Minotaur, the stage directions say, "*Enter the Minotaur carrying Hippolytus, both dripping from the sea*" (124). Over the ceremonially laid out body, the Minotaur tells Theseus, "The wounds on his face are from the rocks but the hoof mark on his back is mine" (124). What might seem like a passing reference conflates two very different figures from the Phaedra myth—the Minotaur slain by Theseus, and Poseidon's sea bull that destroyed Hippolytus. In the original myth, after Phaedra accused Hippolytus of raping her, Theseus asked his father Poseidon to destroy Hippolytus. The sea god sent a bull from the ocean—echoing the divine bull he sent to Minos—which panicked Hippolytus's horses, who dragged the young man to death. By emerging from the ocean with the body of Hippolytus and claiming credit for the boy's death, the Minotaur reidentifies himself as the sea bull. Here we have two temporal hiccups. The first is that Theseus killed the Minotaur before Hippolytus was even born, and yet here the Minotaur—in his avatar as Poseidon's sea bull—delivers the corpse of Theseus's son. Another temporal incongruity is that the play both opens and closes with Hippolytus deceased. The ending returns to the moment of the opening, collapsing the distance between the two points to highlight the cyclical and repetitive nature of mythology.

A Poetics of *Mythographic Metatheatre*

In what sense are the postmodern meta-mythic and metatheatrical references in Carr's play systemic? Adaptation scholars who study mythological revisions often point to the close affinities between myth and adaptation. Julie Sanders claims, "Mythical literature depends upon, incites even, perpetual acts of reinterpretation in new contexts, a process that embodies the very idea of adaptation" (63). Similarly, Miriam Chirico says, "Myth's inherent identity as an oral genre necessitates the act of revision or transformation each time the myth is told; it is as if the narrator tries to present a more accurate or complete view of the story to his or her listeners" (16). Because mythic stories are rooted in oral folk forms, the stories are generically assured to grow, develop, and mutate in response to different socio-cultural contexts. Each story-teller, singer, or artist re-presents the narratives in slightly different ways to suit the tastes of their own audience. In *Phaedra Backwards*, Carr retains significant plot points, including Hippolytus's death, the conflict between Theseus and his son, and sexual tension between Phaedra and Hippolytus (though Hippolytus seems to be as drawn to Phaedra as she is to him, in contrast to the Greek, Roman, and French versions). However, Carr presents these elements with a unique spin. As Elizabeth Scharffenberger points out, while contemporary (feminist) revisions "contest the biases of the mythological tradition inherited from the Greeks, these recent works also arguably participate in the open-ended process of reinvention that characterized this very same tradition from the earliest days of the archaic period" (52).⁵ In other words, the fact that Carr parodically revises a mythical story aligns her play with a long history of mythic story-tellers. What I claim, however, is that the particular way Carr utilizes self-referentiality is significant.

Self-referentiality is central to Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction, from which I take my cue. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon claims that renegotiating the past as a source of knowledge is one of the key tasks of the postmodern. As Hutcheon explains, "What historiographic metafiction challenges is both any naive realist concept of [historical] representation but also any equally naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world" (125). In other words, these texts self-referentially re-tell historical events to call attention to the narrative structures always at work in any historical account. Historiographic metafiction novels may depict authors telling/writing the history they are part of, as in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, or use striking historiographic methodologies, like Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* where the plot is told backwards. These techniques draw readers' attention to the process of storytelling inherently embedded in writing

history. Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction, as a postmodern technique, is parodic and self-conscious. Hutcheon gives this simple working definition: "parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26).⁶ By parodically re-deploying the structures of historical writing, what historiographic metafiction "has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs" (89). Rather than imagining an ontological truth of the past that we can access, historiographic metafiction privileges the meaning-making epistemological practices of discourse, gesturing toward various ways history could be narrativized.

Carr's play uses similar techniques to demonstrate the cultural power of mythology, re-exploring what it means for contemporary authors to use myth as a tool for meaning making. Basically, a myth is a shared story, often with supernatural or divine components, that does not exist in a single primary text. Myths play an explanatory and unifying role within a community. Sanders says simply, "A culture's mythology is its body of traditional narratives" (63). Chirico develops this definition by pointing out that mythic stories do not have a single, recognizable origin point, and that they frequently deal with magic or divine beings and their adventures (16). Because myths are so rarely attributable to a single origin or text (even if there are famous versions, like those by Homer, Euripides, the brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, and the Walt Disney Corporation, among others) the broad outlines of stories tend to be well-known within their own cultures, even if individual versions vary. This fluidity opens the door for artists to utilize source materials in new ways, particularly because "in the case of sources in mythology there is often no specific source text to be adapted," so there is less impetus for fidelity to an original than in adaptation, which implies a specific source text or texts (Foster, "Introduction" 2). Carr does not rework a particular version of the Phaedra myth, though she is well aware of the contours of the myth she is revising, and self-consciously draws attention to her revisions.

Carr displays a postmodern self-consciousness through the play's indication of its own parodic processes. We have seen how metatheatrical and meta-mythic references recur throughout *Phaedra Backwards*, repeatedly signaling Carr's awareness that she is molding mythic elements into a distinct narrative structure, while simultaneously signaling that this is not the only possible narrative structure. Carr repeats elements from the mythic tradition, but with critical distance—primarily by abandoning the chronology in which the myth is typically presented. *Phaedra Backwards*, therefore, enacts both halves of

Hutcheon's definition of parody. This self-conscious deconstruction of structure/time/narrative/causality also appeared in the premier performance run. As Patrick Maley writes in a review for *Stage Magazine*, the play's "first image is a projection saying 'The End,' and the next scene opens with a projection labeling it 'The Beginning,' but the play soon progresses to what a projection calls 'The Beginning of the End.'" The labeling—which is not specified in the published script of *Phaedra Backwards*—shows projection designer Peter Nigrini's engagement with the parodic revisioning at work in this play. The labels draw viewers' attention to the non-linear organization. The parodic structure highlights that revisions are simultaneously unique and the same—they share common foundations and yet inspire new drama, literature, or art. As Hutcheon explains it, parody repeats elements from the source while simultaneously emphasizing a critical distance (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 26). For instance, Phaedra's struggle with modernity—with the weight of personal responsibility in an ostensibly post-mythic age—indicates how different *Phaedra Backwards* is from other versions of the tragic myth. In pining for the paradoxically comfortable structures of the tragic or mythic, Phaedra simultaneously signals her differences from other versions as well as her similarity.

A cursory look at the major sources for *Phaedra Backwards* begins to reveal just how open to parodic re-imagining myth is in terms of form. Each author makes changes to the story, whether major or minor. The basic outlines of the Euripides story remain the same in Seneca, except that Phaedra is determined to pursue her love for Hippolytus and the nurse agrees to help. Phaedra herself reveals her feelings to Hippolytus and then publicly makes the rape accusation rather than putting it in a note. There are obvious differences between the Seneca and Euripides tellings, particularly in how Phaedra herself is presented. In the ancient world, stories did not exist in singular authoritative versions; they were flexible and open to re-interpretation through retelling. Even with highly influential versions like Homer's epics, rhapsodes "may also have ad-libbed and riffed off the script. Rhapsodes presumably introduced variations on the texts in performance" (Wilson 15). This openness to variation is a hallmark of ancient myth—establishing the mix of similarity within difference at the heart of Hutcheon's definition of parody.

The next major version of the story comes from Jean Racine. This seventeenth-century French drama primarily followed Seneca, but with significant changes. In his 1677 Preface, Racine claims that he introduced Aricia—Hippolytus' love interest, added to better reflect the sensibilities of seventeenth-century French theatre patrons—following Virgil and other classical sources (20–21). This is a perfect example of parodic engagement with the myth: Racine capitalizes on the similarity of his story, but simultaneously

establishes a critical distance appropriate for his own time, place, and audience through the introduction of a romantic arc absent from the ancient Greek and Roman versions. Aricia, who also appears in Carr's version, marks a major departure from Racine's Senecan and Euripidean sources, as both of those authors' plots hinge on Hippolytus's strident devotion to the virgin goddess Diana (or Artemis). In Carr's version, Aricia is a kind of outsider who, in another meta-mythic gesture, looks at the world very differently than Phaedra, Hippolytus, and Theseus. At an alcohol-soaked dinner party—reminiscent of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—Aricia concludes, "Seems I'm the only one here can hold in what she thinks, the only one with a shred of manners" (92). Her difference is further signified when Phaedra asks her, "Why haven't you run screaming from this house?" (96). Aricia stands apart, almost as though she does not belong to the same mythic structure as the other characters. She does not quite fit in *Phaedra Backwards*, signaling a peripheral relationship to Carr's precursors.

Carr adopts the mythic structure of the Phaedra story, but her reworking clearly signals difference from previous versions of the play. The important point is not simply that Carr makes changes from earlier iterations, but that the play specifically gestures to these changes, pointing out their importance in Carr's dramaturgical project. *Phaedra Backwards* is almost a textbook example of Hutcheon's definition of parody—relying on both similarities to the existing story and differences from any previous version to create critical distance.

A Poetics of Mythographic Metatheatre

The metatheatricity of *Phaedra Backwards* is equally crucial to its ideological project. Not only is the play self-conscious about its mythic origins (and the possibility that those myths could have inspired a very different play), it also signals an awareness of itself as performative. Alex Feldman makes the case that historiographic metatheatre is a substantially different business than historiographic metafiction. As with Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, Feldman's theory depends largely on self-referentiality to highlight the processes of artistic construction: "metatheatrical rather than simply theatrical indicates the same kind of perspectival displacement. Metatheatre is the self-conscious counterpart to dramatic art—theatre's acknowledgment of its own artifice" (3; original emphasis). The difference is that in theatre, events are acted out by live bodies, rather than described in words. As Feldman puts it, historiographic metatheatrical plays "explore the ways in which history is writ-

ten, the *emplotment* of the events of the past, but this consideration is always supplemented by a further dimension. The playwright does not transmit an account of events, but the events themselves, re-enacted" (25; original emphasis). Not only is history discursive, historical events are revealed as performative and ephemeral. Tom Stoppard is a consistent practitioner of historiographic metatheatre, with plays like *Arcadia* and *Travesties* exemplifying the genre.⁷ In fact, theatre is especially useful for renegotiating historic (and mythic) discourses because, as Marvin Carlson argues, theatre relies on memory and the replication of past performances. He writes, "The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced, these are and always have been central concerns of the theatre in all times and places" (3). The fact that theatre is driven by replication makes it especially effective for reassessing events, stories, performances, etc. Performance is always, to some extent, re-performance.⁸ Theatre, especially on historical or mythical subjects, "involves the dramatist in the presentation of a narrative that is haunted in almost every aspect—its names, its character relationships, the structure of its action, even small physical or linguistic details" (17).

Memory-as-haunting plays out violently in scene eight of *Phaedra Backwards*, where the ghosts of Phaedra's past return to literally eat her alive. The Minotaur's accusation that Phaedra forgot him and their sister Ariadne introduces memory as a theme (108). The Minotaur then enters with the spirit of Ariadne—who had helped her lover Theseus defeat the Minotaur, and in death blames Phaedra for stealing Theseus from her (110). Phaedra notes the phantasmic apparition and foreshadows future hauntings, asking, "Are all the graves open tonight?" (110). Shortly after, the stage directions tell us that the Minotaur "taps his hooves on the stones of the terrace. The stones open, like graves, tombs, vaults. Out climb Pasiphae and Minos" (113). Phaedra is the last surviving member of her family, and they have come back from the dead to demand retribution from her for surviving and from Theseus for murdering the Minotaur and betraying Ariadne. Her parents accuse her: Pasiphae admonishing, "You cannot continue to live with your sister's husband, your brother's killer," and Minos asking, "Why should you live when we don't? Why should you eat when we starve?" (116).

These ghosts have returned with a vicious hunger, literally to consume Phaedra as revenge for the wrongs fate (or tragedy) has dealt them. The stage directions say, "Arranging themselves around [Phaedra], they surround her, paw and scrape and lunge. Minotaur lifts her up with one arm, suspends her there, whatever way it's done she is hanging in mid-air" (116). In the original McCarter Theatre run, Stephanie Roth Haberle, who played Phaedra, was hung from a meat

hook (see production photos in *American Theatre's* "Phaedra Backwards"). As Phaedra hangs center stage, the real violence begins. Ariadne tells the Minotaur to strip the flesh from her bones, and Pasiphae and Minos begin biting hunks out of her legs, back, and torso (117). Phaedra hanging in midair echoes earlier dramatic versions, because in both Euripides and Seneca, Phaedra commits suicide by hanging herself. While Carr's Phaedra is less suicidal than her Euripidean, Senecan, or Racinean avatars, this scene stages her inability to escape the structuring characteristics of myth. Although not suicidal and not fatal, Phaedra's inevitable hanging is parodically revised to illustrate the tyranny of the mythic plot elements.

This scene also draws on another Greek mythic element, one not normally associated with the Phaedra cycle—namely, sparagmos and omophagia. Sparagmos is the sacrifice of a living animal or person by ripping it to pieces, and omophagia is the ritualized consumption of the raw flesh. One of the best-known examples is in Euripides's *Bacchae*, where the Maenads murder Pentheus by tearing him apart. In part because of this scene, sparagmos has strong associations with the wild Dionysian mysteries, and of course Dionysus was the patron deity of the theatre. Carr's incorporation of sparagmos into the Phaedra story signifies on two levels: it self-referentially highlights the Dionysian resonances in classical theatre and increases the hybridity of Carr's collage of sources by adding a further mythological element not normally linked to the Phaedra myth. In addition, this scene evokes another intertext: Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, an In-Yer-Face version of the myth. At the end of Kane's version, a perversely lethargic Hippolytus is brutally killed by an angry mob. He is strangled by one man while a woman emasculates him and barbecues his severed genitals, which are then fed to dogs, before the disguised Theseus disembowels his son and barbecues his guts (38–39). Each play features a hanging/strangulation with the victim physically eaten. But in Carr's play, it is particularly noteworthy that the ghosts of her past consume her, showing the consumptive force of the myth itself, the ability of past mythic and theatrical predecessors to exert their influence over contemporary adapters.

Theatre is haunted by the very fact of live performance, by the replication of a show night after night and by different companies in different contexts. The ephemerality of theatrical production requires a continual re-engagement with the meaning, purpose, ideas, and imaginings of a play, opening the door for continual revision. As Sanders claims, "The dramatic form encourages persistent reworking and imagining. Performance is an inherently adaptive art; each staging is a collaborative interpretation" (48). Performance nods to the changeable potential of narrative because any given performance enacts only one possible potential, only one possible way a show could be put on. This can

reflect back on narrative (or myth) as a meaning-making tool by reminding us that any given version is only one potential interpretation of the narrative materials. Or, as Feldman puts it, "theatre is the ideal medium in which to consider the versions of history, in all their instability, because the provisionality of the stage and the ephemeral nature of its representations complement postmodernism's sense of the plurality of historical truths" (25). The same premises apply with myth—that myth is inherently open to re-interpreting, and that performative choices made in theatre reflect the same processes of choosing and shaping that go into any given telling of myth. In the theatre it is done live and in real time. What distinguishes mythographic metatheatre from simple retellings of myth is the postmodern self-referentiality that marks a play like Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards*.

In *Phaedra Backwards*, Carr takes a particular approach to mythic repurposing, in which postmodern self-referentiality draws attention to the constructedness of both mythology and theatre. Through this self-awareness, which I am calling mythographic metatheatre, Carr raises questions about what artists can do with culturally sanctioned stories—stories that outline the hopes, aspirations, ethics, and ideals of those cultures. In particular, Carr's revised *Phaedra* asks us to consciously reconsider the role of mythology and tragedy in shaping our self-conceptions. To what extent do we remain subject to the stories we tell ourselves? To what extent are we subject to our cultural narratives? To what extent can we exercise genuine individual freedom? And does it matter if we do so? Without offering, or seeking to offer, any concrete answers to these queries, mythographic metatheatre and *Phaedra Backwards* urge us to consider possible answers without forgetting that any answer we create for ourselves is likely to be equally rooted in the myths which shape our consciousness.

NOTES

1. There was also a *Phaedra* play by Sophocles that may have been available to Seneca, though both its performance date and content are unknown today (McDermott 241).

2. For more information on Irish adaptations of Greek drama in general, see, for instance, Brian Arkins, Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton, Peter McDonald, or Kelly Younger.

3. The difficulty of audience recognition/familiarity is something that any number of adaptation theorists have considered, and I do not propose to wade into the discussion here. For some information on the problem, see Verna Foster's "Introduction" (4–5), Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (120–128), or Julia Sanders's *Adaptation and Appropriation* (45).

4. Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* provides a famous analysis of modern anxiety (10–21).

5. For an argument on the feminist implications of *Phaedra Backwards*, see Melissa Sihra (517), or for more general feminist analysis of mythic revisions, see Elizabeth Scharffenberger (50–53).

6. Hutcheon's most developed treatment of parody is her aptly named book *A Theory of Parody*.

7. See my essay "Compromised Epistemologies" for more on historiographic metatheatre in these plays (313–322).

8. There is disagreement among theatre and adaptation scholars about whether individual performances are fundamentally adaptive. This is, again, a larger debate I will not enter in this essay. For an argument that individual performances do/can constitute adaptations, see Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (3–4); for the opposite argument, see Margaret Kidnie (32–34).

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