Introduction: A Creative Female Corporeality

In the opening moments of *riverrun* (2013), Olwen Fouéré delivers a rallying cry: 'Calling all downs. Calling all downs to dayne. Array! Surrection.'[1] Fouéré's astonishing solo performance is an adaptation of the last section of James Joyce's novel *Finnegan's Wake*, and its significance lies in Fouéré's re-embodiment of the river, Anna Livia Plurabelle. Understanding the performing female body as a lived body which is fundamental to experience and the production of knowledge enables exploration of the creativity of the female body. Not only does Fouéré seize control of the frame of narration from one of Ireland's male literary giants, but the bodily meanings generated through performance recover that which has been erased by female iconicity.

Irish theatre has long been steeped in mythic narratives, an obsession which has hindered women's participation in the cultural fabric of society through the perpetuation of idealized and dematerialized tropes of femininity. Yet, women theatre makers have persistently and imaginatively engaged with and re-written these icons to refuse this silence. Anna Livia Plurabelle's 'Array! Surrection', or resurrection, through *riverrun* defiantly marks her corporeal resistance and the moment 'when the icons return to haunt the icon makers'.[2] Indeed, the icon *becomes* the icon maker as Fouéré awakens the audience to Anna Livia's desires and to the possibilities for female self-authorship and a creative female corporeality. *riverrun* is part of the rich tradition of women's mythmaking in Irish theatre that constitutes the focus of this book; a tradition which is invigorated by energetic opposition to inherited myths and thereby defined by the ongoing struggle

[1] James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939; repr. London: Penguin, 1992), p. 593. *riverrun.* Adapted, directed and performed: Olwen Fouéré. Co-Director: Kellie Hughes. Sound design: Alma Kelliher. Lighting design: Stephen Dodd. Costume: Monica Frawley (TheEmergencyRoom and Galway Arts Festival: Druid Theatre, Galway, opened 18 July 2013).

[2] Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 197.

to dismantle cultural and material structures that support male power and privilege.

Fouéré reshapes the contours of Anna Livia's body to demand female expression; likewise, it is the intention of this book to forge a new paradigm, the genealogy, as a means of remodelling our understanding of the development of Irish theatre. Cathy Leeney describes 'the stubborn persistence of patriarchally-led definitions of what is canonical' in Irish theatre and argues that 'simply adding women to the mix is not enough'.[3] Leeney develops this argument in her contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*; one of two chapters devoted to women in theatre.[4]

It is a pointed irony that her astute exposure of the difficulty of moving beyond the stage of the recovery of women's work to 'an integration of this recovery into canonical judgement, a disruption of the canon' appears seventeen chapters into the collection.[5] My proposal of the genealogy is an explicit engagement with the male-dominated literary canon and mythmaking of Irish theatre and masculinist scholarship which have served to replicate the marginalization of women's voices and experiences from the public sphere. I draw on feminist philosopher Alison Stone's use of the term genealogy which is not concerned with origins, purity and bloodlines, but rather advocates a coalitional politics whereby 'women are connected together in complex and variable ways, through historical chains of partially and multiply overlapping interpretations of femininity'.[6]

The mythmaking in the plays and performances discussed in this book comprise these chains of reinterpretation. Moreover, the non-linear genealogy indicates the 'progress' of women's history in twentieth and twenty-first century Ireland, characterized by periods where women's demands for equality have been met, only to be followed by regression. A linear canon of Irish theatre has served to reinforce the apparent silence of these stalled periods by severing the connections which form a tradition of women's theatre. Rebecca Schneider speaks to the process of reperformance: 'striking a pose partakes of reenactment, and reenactment defers its site in

[3] Cathy Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights, 1900–1939: Gender and Violence on Stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 10.

[4] See Cathy Leeney's 'Women and Irish Theatre Before 1960' and Melissa Sihra's 'Shadow and Substance: Women, Feminism and Irish Theatre after 1980', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). There are forty-one chapters in the *Handbook*.

[5] Leeney, 'Women and Irish Theatre Before 1960', p. 269.

[6] Alison Stone, 'On the Genealogy of Women: A Defence of Anti-Essentialism', in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 85–96 (p. 93).

multiple directions. What is cited extends not only into the past but also across complicated fields of possibility that undo any linearity that would give us, securely, forward and backward.'[7] The women in this genealogy 'strike a (mythic) pose' which defers in multiple directions to speak across the silences and create a (non-essentialist) body of work. In the chapters that follow, I develop the lines of confluence between these women to uncover the hidden veins of resistance and revolution embodied in their mythmaking.

The theatrical work explored extends from the start of the twentieth century, when the manipulation of myths of femininity was intertwined with the fight for an independent state and the subsequent development of the modern Irish state, to the present day where these myths linger on and have been moulded by other emergent forces such as neoliberalism and globalization in more recent decades, forces which have also spawned new myths of femininity. The performances analysed include the tableaux vivants performed by the Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland), plays written by Alice Milligan, Maud Gonne, Lady Augusta Gregory, Eva Gore-Booth, Mary Devenport O'Neill, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Paula Meehan, Edna O'Brien and Marina Carr, as well as plays translated, adapted and performed by Olwen Fouéré. Though the contexts differ, all the work studied in this book coheres around a self-conscious adoption of mythic narrative to critique idealized myths of femininity which support patriarchal structures and repudiate women's cultural participation. The performances interrogate the contingent and performative nature of myth and gender to articulate women's experience of exclusion, as well as uncovering the possibilities for expressing a creative female corporeality.

The Legacy of Mother Ireland

The stultifying legacy of idealized myths has occluded women's cultural engagement through confinement to iconicity. In her seminal work, *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation*, Melissa Sihra explains how, in Ireland, 'the social and cultural position of woman has historically been one of symbolic centrality and subjective disavowal as both colonial ideology and nationalist movements promoted feminized concepts of nation, while subordinating women in everyday

[7] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 161.

life'.[8] The gendered narrative of representing woman as land can be traced back to the sovereignty figure: a pagan goddess of the land who conferred prosperity on a people through her union with their king.

This figure had several functions, representing war, fertility, sex and victory, but different aspects were employed and emphasized during different historical periods. The Morrígan, a goddess of war, had a dominant position in early Irish literature but this figure, and her sexual function, was later shunned in favour of the *aisling* figure.[9] This popular poetic convention flourished in the eighteenth century in response to the imposition of British rule following seventeenth century colonization. The narrative follows the dream convention as the poet falls asleep and has a dream-vision of a beautiful lady who tells him she is Ireland. However, the *aisling* was 'no longer a powerful or practical goddess, but a weak, melancholy maiden, romanticized and unreal'.[10] In the nineteenth century it was the more defiant figure of the *Shan Van Vocht* (The Poor Old Woman) who was favoured and appeared in political ballads.[11] The representation of women in myth during the early years of twentieth century Ireland was largely shaped by the political agenda of emergent cultural nationalism: the choice of myth was influenced by the need to represent Ireland's struggle for independence. This is epitomized in W.B. Yeats's and Lady Gregory's 1902 play *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in which the eponymous Kathleen is the symbolic Mother Nation figure who is dependent on the actions of men and serves to inspire them. The possibility of locating a feminist politics in this play is explored in detail in Chapter 1's discussion of the premiere production.

The enduring trope of Mother Ireland has defined women's bodies as the terrain over which power has been contested, while concurrently erasing the reality of their corporeal experiences. During the Revival years of the early twentieth century and the foundation of the Irish Free State, the Catholic Church contributed to the construction of an immutable Irish feminine identity through recourse to the Virgin Mother as role model. Ailbhe Smyth's description of 'the realities of Irish women's lives Mater-reality'[12] captures how this idealized figure became the 'reality' that shaped and supplanted the material realities of women's lives. The legacy of

[8] Melissa Sihra, *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.
[9] Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrígan to Cathleen ní Houlihan* (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 1991), p. 8.
[10] Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 6. [11] Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 169.
[12] Ailbhe Smyth, 'The Floozie in the Jacuzzi', *The Irish Review*, No. 6 (Spring 1989), 7–24 (p. 8).

these attitudes is still felt in Ireland today. In March 2018 former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, delivered the opening address at the 'Why Women Matter' conference in Rome, in which she lambasted the Catholic Church as 'an empire of misogyny'. McAleese spoke of the need for reform within the Catholic Church, fostered by gender equality: 'John Paul II has written of the "mystery of women". Talk to us as equals and we will not be a mystery.'[13]

The perpetuation of inequality through a mystified and idealized construction of 'woman' underpins the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution, inserted in 1983, which effectively bans abortion and denies women their bodily autonomy. Instead, the reality of women's bodily experiences has been dealt with by evasion: between January 1980 and December 2016, at least 170,216 women and girls travelled from the Republic of Ireland to access abortion services in another country.[14] Following decades of campaigning, the Eighth Amendment was repealed by a referendum held on 25 May 2018. The resounding defeat of the amendment was evidenced by the voting figures; an almost exact reversal of the figures in 1983 when 66.9 per cent voted to insert Article 40.3.3 into the constitution, while in 2018 66.4 per cent of voters voted for its repeal.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir delineates between the fixity of mythic 'woman' and the complexity of actual women: 'Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless.'[15] The central concern of this book is how women in Irish theatre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have employed mythic narratives to expose the gap between idealized myths of femininity and women's lived realities. I explore how these performances grapple with this tension through consideration of embodied experience, for, as Elizabeth Grosz explains: 'Far from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles.'[16] Myth can impose limiting and inflexible representations which present female identity as timeless and unchangeable, yet it is through their attention to embodied

[13] Patsy McGarry, 'Catholic Church Resembles "a Male Bastion of Patronising Platitudes", McAleese Says', *Irish Times*, 8 March 2018, www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/catholic-church-resembles-a-male-bastion-of-patronising-platitudes-mcaleese-says-1.3419596 [Accessed 8 March 2018].
[14] www.ifpa.ie/Hot-Topics/Abortion/Statistics [Accessed 8 March 2018].
[15] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949; repr. London: Vintage, 1997), p. 283.
[16] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 19.

female experience that the theatre makers considered herein resist this illusion. The theatrical work discussed reveals the process of embodied mythmaking: how bodies bear the consequences of myths of femininity, while refusing the female body as passive bearer of inscription. The assertion of a creative female corporeality refuses the negative and essentialist alignment of woman and the body, and is central to repositioning women as the icon makers.

Embodied Mythmaking and the Writing Body

Embodied mythmaking considers the reiteration, reperformance and reinscription of myths on and through the body. Analysis of the theatrical work examined here attends to the ways in which bodies trace the residues of an inheritance of limiting myths of femininity, yet we can also look to the ways in which bodies might reinscribe meaning. This requires casting the body not simply as matter onto which meaning is imposed, but as the body–subject through which we experience and know the world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* addresses the bias in Western philosophy towards René Descartes' privileging of the mind over body, a hierarchical binary which has been mapped onto man and woman, and instead suggests: 'The world is not what I think, but what I live through.'[17] Elizabeth Grosz describes the importance of Merleau-Ponty's work for feminism:

> His emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be regarded as feminism's major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges – its necessary reliance on lived experience, on experiential acquaintance as touchstone or criterion of the validity of theoretical postulates.[18]

Feminist phenomenologists, including Grosz and Iris Marion Young, have explored the implication that the lived body is fundamental to both experience and the production of knowledge: 'The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is a body-in-situation.'[19] This approach is of vital importance to

[17] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945; repr. Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p. xviii.
[18] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 94.
[19] Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 16.

this study in its acknowledgement of the specific material, and thus historical, contexts of corporeal being.

Remaining cognisant of context ensures that we acknowledge both the ways in which women are limited by, and simultaneously test, prescribed cultural limits. Young captures this tension in her description of 'the variable movements of habituated bodies reacting to, reproducing and modifying structures'.[20] Young examines how female embodiment within patriarchal society is defined by contradiction and ambiguity as a result of women's experience as both subject and object: 'as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence [. . .] [the] tension between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object'.[21] Woman's contradictory experience is further developed by Rosalind Gill who examines the relationship between culture and subjectivity within the contemporary frame of 'neoliberal and postfeminist times'. Gill marks 'the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification',[22] whereby woman's subjecthood is defined by individualism and 'a compulsory (sexual) agency'.[23] Through my discussion of twenty-first century performances, I address this postfeminist fetishization of autonomous choice in order to examine our investments in the circulation of myths of femininity; for as Gill states, 'This is much more than a remoulding of the body; it is nothing short of a remaking of subjectivity.'[24]

The examination of embodied mythmaking through twentieth and twenty-first century Irish theatre enables the redress of Irish theatre studies' neglect of female bodies; both their creativity and their histories. The elision of female experience and of female bodies has been perpetuated by Irish theatre, and the study of it, as a predominantly literary theatre tradition; as Anna McMullan notes, 'the linguistic virtuosity of Irish theatre has a high textual value, and this very value encourages a primarily textual construction of Irish theatre history'.[25] Within the Irish literary theatre tradition, women's contribution has been marked by iconicity and, furthermore, the association of woman with the body has heightened the effects of a critical neglect of bodies within a theatre

[20] Young, *On Female Body Experience*, p. 26. [21] Young, *On Female Body Experience*, p. 32.
[22] Rosalind Gill, 'Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and Postfeminist Times', *Subjectivity*, 25 (2008), 432–45 (p. 437).
[23] Gill, 'Culture and Subjectivity', p. 440. [24] Gill, 'Culture and Subjectivity', p. 440.
[25] Anna McMullan, 'Reclaiming Performance: The Contemporary Irish Independent Theatre Sector', in *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties*, ed. Eberhard Bort (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1996), pp. 29–38 (p. 31).

tradition that affords prominence to the literary text. That said, Irish theatre studies has looked to the body with renewed interest; for example, in *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* Bernadette Sweeney re-examines five Irish plays which have 'been suppressed in some way by the dominant discourse of dramatic, textual analysis'.[26] If, following Turner and Behrndt, we define dramaturgy as 'the composition of a work, whether read as a script or viewed in performance'[27] and extend this analysis 'beyond the performance itself, to include the context, the audience and the various ways in which the work is framed',[28] embodied mythmaking offers a dramaturgical framework through which to view the contributions of women in Irish theatre.

My intention throughout is to uncover a feminist reading of the work which displaces the privileged viewpoint 'of the ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male spectator' and in his place locates a 'feminist spectator who can cast an eye critical of dominant ideology'.[29] Performance analysis is central to my discussion of embodied mythmaking in each chapter. Where I have experienced performances at first hand or had access to recordings of performances, I consider the contribution of text, direction, performance and creative design in interpreting meaning. However, there is scant archival material on some of the plays while others have never been staged, so in these instances I have worked with the performance text to uncover the potential for a feminist reading of the work and its embodied mythmaking.

My focus is on how these layers of meaning shape the body as a 'site of contestation'[30] to open up the gap between body and representation, between corporeal reality and mythic icon, thereby undoing the authority and apparent fixity of myth. Through performance, the women discussed in this book corporeally challenge and rewrite the myths imposed on them, and shift their role from bearing to creating and controlling meaning. The chapters which follow cohere around the body in process as it is presented before an audience: bodies that are revolutionary, unhomely, sacrificial and dying, haunted and, in (the final) Chapter 6, writing bodies. My approach draws on dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster's 'claim for a writing-dancing

[26] Bernadette Sweeney, *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 2.
[27] Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 4.
[28] Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance,* p. 18.
[29] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991; repr. 1998), p. 18.
[30] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 19.

body',[31] which enables examination of corporeal interventions in the cultural production of myths of femininity. Embodied mythmaking is thus concerned with how bodies are written upon but also resist forms of cultural production, and how these resistant writing bodies perform alternatives that negotiate female agency and expression.

Each of the chapters examines performances that offer bodies inscribed by an archive of myths of femininity but which also generate other possibilities. The revolutionary bodies in Chapter 1 offer the means of analysing the negotiation of change and the different feminisms at play at the turn of the twentieth century through discussion of the Inghinidhe na hÉireann's tableaux vivants (1901), Maud Gonne's performance in *Kathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, Gonne's play *Dawn* (published in 1904) and Eva Gore-Booth's play *The Triumph of Maeve* (written in 1902 and published 1905). The discussion of theatrical form which emerges in Chapter 1 is further developed in Chapter 2 on unhomely bodies. I focus on Paula Meehan's *Mrs Sweeney* (1997) and Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's *Women in Arms* (1988 and 2002) to examine the tension between the body and the space it inhabits, and thus women's experience of a lack of accommodation within society and onstage, through alternative forms to realism.

The pursuit of alternative forms is advanced in Chapter 3's exploration of metamorphic bodies in Lady Gregory's *Grania* (published 1912) and Marina Carr's *The Mai* (1994). Metamorphosis as a process of transformation and corporeal change offers the means of refusing the unhomely experience and negotiating expression and accommodation. Resisting the curtailment of corporeal expression is central to Chapter 4's discussion of sacrificial bodies in Marina Carr's *Ariel* (2002), Edna O'Brien's *Iphigenia* (2003) and the dying body in Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006). These plays, to varying degrees, refuse the beauty of the female corpse and explore the trope of the 'good death' as a process of dematerialization and desexualization which erases female corporeal experience. Chapter 5's analysis of Mary Devenport O'Neill's ballet-poem *Bluebeard* (1933), Eva Gore-Booth's *The Buried Life of Deirdre* (written between 1908–12 and illustrated in 1916–17, although not published until 1930) and Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) explores the haunted body as a site of memory which enables the resurfacing of violent histories.

Central to all these chapters is analysis of the persistent theatrical efforts to articulate the female body in process as a means of dismantling the

[31] Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 19.

perfection of mythic icons of femininity: a corpus of work which traces the consequences of myths of femininity as they are felt through the body and which generates the possibility of rewriting them. Process and transformation underpin the discussion in all chapters of the book and culminate in the concluding chapter (Chapter 6) on Olwen Fouéré's *Sodome, My Love* (2010) and *riverrun* (2013). In this final chapter I draw on Jean-Luc Nancy's work in *Corpus* to advance a new framework for feminist critique of performance. His notion of 'exscription' addresses that which is beyond inscription and can be applied to the endeavour of reclaiming the unhomely female body which is outside of the symbolic frame. Both plays are male-authored texts – Fouéré translates Laurent Gaudé's script of *Sodome, My Love* and adapts James Joyce's novel in *riverrun* – but I would argue that Fouéré is the author who uses the female body as the primary text. Her performances champion a creative female corporeality and assert female authorship to question the dominance of a text-focused performance tradition. Expression of the female writing body serves to resist the imposition of myth and silence, as Hélène Cixous proposes: 'By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display.'[32]

The inheritance that the myth of woman as nation, another uncanny stranger, has bequeathed women writers is addressed by the poet Eavan Boland: 'What I found was a rhetoric of imagery which alienated me: a fusion of the national and the feminine which simplified both.'[33] Both are patriarchal constructs which deny the expression of women's subjectivity and renounce their bodies. My focus on embodied genealogies of women's performance serves to refuse the deathly silence imposed by the perpetuation of essentialist binaries on the female body. This genealogy of women's mythmaking constitutes a body of work animated by the suppressed realities of women's corporeal experiences; thereby enabling a dual reconsideration of patriarchal and conceptual frameworks of the female body *and* the canon of Irish theatre.

Mythmaking and Nation Building

A nation's heritage is one of its unifying components, offering a sense of the past and future through a created collective consciousness of its people. Mythologies are part of this heritage, traditional stories passed down

[32] Hélène Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1:4 (Summer 1976), 875–93 (p. 880).
[33] Boland, *Object Lessons*, p. 128.