

Liminal figures in Marina Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* and Emma Dante's *Vita mia*

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Introduction

This article examines the work of Italian theatre practitioner, Emma Dante, and Irish playwright, Marina Carr, both of whom show a recurring preoccupation with death and dying in their work. Contrasting the modern taste for signalling a sharp divide between life and death, in these female writers' work the lines and divisions between this world and the next are not clearly drawn. A number of characters across the writers' *oeuvre* occupy liminal spaces within the spectrum of life and death. Neither alive nor dead, these characters blur the edges of our understanding of death. Using Victor Turner's theory of liminality, this paper seeks to investigate the position of these "betwixt and between" characters, focussing on two plays, Dante's *Vita mia* and Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow*. Both plays are deathbed scenes that resist and reimagine the conventions of the genre.

To date, Marina Carr has written fifteen plays, ten of which are published. Her plays have generally been produced by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, with some commissions carried out for companies such as the Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company in the U.K. Carr has been the subject of academic study for some time now in Ireland with journal articles and monographs dedicated to her work. Drawing heavily on Greek myth, Carr's body of work deals principally with themes such as love, the impossibility of communication, and relationships between genders. Her plays are characterized by a focus on female characters, mythological and classical references, humour, brutality and death.

Emma Dante is a contemporary Italian theatre practitioner, director and playwright, who came to national Italian attention in 2001 with her play *mPalermu* (Inside Palermo) for which she was awarded the national prize, Premio scenario. She has written and directed twelve plays to date, six of which are published. Eager to experiment and work in new mediums, Dante investigates modern social situations placing an emphasis on the actors' physicality and on the body. Working with a permanent company of actors, she does not write her plays, but rather develops characters and scenarios during the rehearsal process. Dante deliberately posits herself and the company as peripheral to the Italian national theatre scene.

Vita mia by Dante was first produced in October 2004, as the third play in Dante's *Trilogia della famiglia Siciliana* (Trilogy of the Sicilian Family). In common with the other two plays, we find ourselves in a family setting, with a mother and her three sons. Centre stage we see a bed—a funeral bed—that we come to understand is awaiting a corpse; one of the three apparently living sons. The mother and two

surviving brothers prepare the youngest son, Chicco, for his own wake. Although we know he is dead, the audience observe him bound playfully around the stage, joking with his brothers and resisting his mother's attempts to dress him in funerary clothing. The play focuses on the tragedy of death and on the grief and suffering of the mother and surviving sons.

Woman and Scarecrow premiered at the Royal Court Theatre on 21 June 2006. It is a deathbed narrative, where the protagonist, Woman, is dying of an unspecified ailment much to the chagrin of her husband, Him, and her aunt named Auntie Ah. Bedbound Woman is accompanied by a figure called Scarecrow—representing her soul, conscience or artistic spirit—who holds her to account for the mistakes she has made in her life. In Melissa Sihra's words, *Woman and Scarecrow* is “an intense contemplation on the cyclicity of life and death” (171). It is a play that focuses on a life lived in mediocrity and fear and the significance of death in our lives.

Liminality: neither alive nor dead

Victor Turner, the eminent anthropologist and ethnologist, formed the theory of liminality after Van Gennep's theories on *Rites de passage*. Studying rituals, Van Gennep theorized that that all rites of transition have three stages; separation, margin (or limen) in which “the state of the liminal subject (the ‘passenger’) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” and finally, aggregation, in which the subject is stable again and “is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards” (*Forest* 94). Turner then focussed on the middle phase, which he called the liminal phase. The liminal subject, according to Turner, is often segregated from the rest of society. He is stripped of his property, his clothing is either removed or reduced, he is a “*tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status” (Turner, *Forest* 89). Liminality, according to Turner, is characterized by transition, the presence of *communitas*, the absence of property and status, nakedness or uniform clothing and an acceptance of pain and suffering.

This state of liminality is utilized by Carr and Dante in their characterization and setting of their plays to facilitate a fuller investigation of life's greatest mystery: death. Both *Woman and Scarecrow* and *Vita mia* contain characters that can be defined as liminal. They cannot be categorized in the normal binary manner—as either alive or dead—and they are in a process of transition from one state to another. Their liminality is underlined by a number of external traits. Chicco in *Vita mia* and the protagonist in *Woman and Scarecrow* shift between the supposedly fixed ontological states of life and death.

Just like Turner's neophytes, who “are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another” (*Forest* 97), Chicco appears to be alive in some moments and dead or dying in others. Throughout the play, he seems to oscillate

between the life and passions he had and the abandonment of his life and interests. The audience soon realizes that the wake bed is being prepared for him, that the youngest of three sons, the “baby” of the family, has died. Initially, Chicco plays with his brothers and jokes with them, full of mischief and seemingly full of life. However, as the mother prepares the bed, and Chicco, for a funeral wake, subtle markers make it clear that he is no longer in life. While his mother dresses him in a white suit for the wake, Chicco tears away from her to play imaginary football with his favourite local football team. Later, she places him, “un angelo vestito di bianco” (“an angel dressed in white”) (59), in the wake bed. Lying on his back, he fastens his hands across his chest and closes his eyes. At this point, he loses all signs of animation and appears to be dead. His mother cannot countenance his death at this moment and so begins a desperate effort to bring him back to life. Chicco then gets out of the deathbed and “scappa, corre ... è vivo e pazzo di gioia” (“flees, runs ... he’s alive and delirious with joy”) (164). On his final lap of life, he runs into the family’s bicycle, thus recreating the accident that killed him. In this moment, “si stacca dall’anima” (“he separates from his soul”) (164). Afterwards, Chicco appears to be definitively dead; his body is limp and lifeless, he no longer speaks or breathes.

Like Chicco, Woman, in Carr’s *Woman and Scarecrow*, appears in some moments to be alive and dying in others. The play is set in her bedroom, where she is dying from a cause unknown, but perhaps of her own doing. The action of the play consists of conversations between Woman and the Scarecrow figure, and separate interactions with her husband and aunt. In these conversations, Woman reviews her unhappy marriage with her husband and her troubled relationship with her Aunt Ah, who acted as her guardian after the death of her mother.

Woman’s ontology in the play is fluctuating and changing. In her initial interaction with Scarecrow, Woman is seemingly in a state of unconsciousness (18), though she appears alive and active to the audience. Woman’s state while alone with Scarecrow is an undefined condition, where she is not conscious to the world, but nevertheless capable of interacting with her companion. She only returns to consciousness on talking to her husband, named in the text as Him. In these blazing moments of banter, feisty provocation and sentimental recollection, Woman is fully and indisputably alive. Her physical decline is, however, painfully evident. Her motor skills soon begin to fail her; she can no longer hold her wine glass to her mouth to drink (30), and fissures in what we perceive as reality appear. This physical deterioration is accompanied by an alteration in her ontology. At the end of act 1, having passionately confronted Him about his continuing extra-marital affair, we observe that Woman is edging ever closer to the realm of death. She herself feels a shift in her being:

SCARECROW. Close, you’re getting close.

WOMAN. I see tombs in shadow, mossy, weather-scarred tombs and all the dead squashed in and me with them wondering if there is starlight above. I’m being buried alive. I am my own ghost. (40)

The descent into death causes a rupture within Woman's ontology. She is entering the world of death, tasting the sensations of the dead, though still clutching to life. This sudden vision of burial and decay brings her to the threshold of definitive death. She is no longer her living self, but becomes rather a shadow of herself, her own ghost. Woman undergoes a shift in being, her relationship with reality is changed, she gains access to spheres that are inaccessible to the other living characters. She goes beyond our definition of life. This shifting towards death becomes more pronounced, until finally, in the closing scene, she ceases breathing and dies.

Both Woman and Chicco's condition in the respective plays, therefore, is one of "ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories" (Turner, *Forest* 97). Our usual binary terms to describe life or the lack of it—"alive" or "dead"—no longer suffice. Their state is paradoxically neither and both. This suspension between the binary states of life and death is a liminal condition. Chicco and Woman's liminal status is indicated and underlined by elements that, according to Turner, accompany the liminal state, such as clothing and property. Turner notes how a neophyte in the liminal state is stripped of his property, his clothing is either removed or reduced, he is a "*tabula rasa*, a blank slate" (*Ritual* 89). Both Chicco and Woman are dressed in nightwear. Chicco, Uccio and Gaspare all wear pyjamas, symbolizing their belonging to the social group of brothers. Chicco's clothes are gradually removed and he is dressed in a white funerary suit, thus stripping him of this status and placing him in the transitional, liminal state of the dead body. Although there is no mention of the clothing worn by Woman in Carr's text, many past productions have dressed her in a light-coloured nightgown. This gives the sense that her clothing, which would identify her with a particular social group and class, has been stripped away. All signs of social belonging have been removed. When the period of transition is over, Turner's neophyte is again dressed in a non-uniform manner. Woman, in her final letter, makes preparations for this return to clothing, leaving strict instructions on how her corpse should be dressed in her own clothes for the funeral (52).

Liminality, according to Turner, is not a static ontology; it is rather a condition of transition. Both characters are transitioning from life to death. In his death, Chicco undergoes an ontological shift, moving from life to the point where his body and soul separate, and finally on to death. However, it should be noted that these stages are not represented in a linear fashion onstage. In the course of the play, Chicco passes through two distinct phases. The first is located between the moment of his accident and actual death, and the second between his death and the official funerary rites that should follow. There is no reference to an after-life.

While Chicco's transition does not follow a linear chronology, Woman's transformation follows an unwavering linear progress. Although quite lively at the play's opening, indulging in glasses of wine and cigarette smoking, Woman's decline is even and regular. The play tracks the arc of her transition from an unwell, but alert subject, to her final breath and death at the play's close. As Sihra points out, death in Marina Carr's plays is "a moment of transition rather than an end point" (173). It does

not all end with Woman's final breath, but it is indicated that her breath ceasing will begin a new cycle and new experiences in death.

Scarecrow

In many ways the liminal figures of Chicco and Woman are similar and comparable. In *Woman and Scarecrow*, however, we find another liminal character that differs from them in significant ways. Scarecrow accompanies Woman throughout the play and is not visible to anyone else. She is not alive in the traditional sense; she is not human, but her existence is linked to Woman's and their fates are tied. As mentioned above, Scarecrow could be a supernatural being, a ghost, Woman's conscience or her soul. While Carr does not explicitly define her status, we do know that Scarecrow chose Woman as a companion before her life began. She says: "I truly believed when I latched onto you before the weaver's throne, I truly believed that you and I would amount to something. I was wrong" (19). Scarecrow existed before Woman's life began and will continue to exist after Woman has died. In contrast to Chicco and Woman's mortality, Scarecrow's existence is eternal and immortal. Scarecrow, after Woman's death, will have another chance to go on and choose a new companion and, consequently, a new life: "I was there before you and I'll be there after . . . I'm through with you. I'm just going through the motions. I'll find someone else" (20).

Scarecrow's ontology is ambiguous. Though physically present onstage and visible to Woman, her existence goes completely unnoticed by Him and Auntie Ah. Her invisibility and inaudibility to the living characters suggests that she is present in this world without being physically manifest. This suggests a new ontology that cannot be catered for in our current frame of reference for ontological states. Invisible and immortal, Scarecrow's existence eludes definition under our binary standards. Her ontology lies outside the concepts of life and death as we understand them. She is neither alive, nor, it seems, can she die.

Like Chicco and Woman, Scarecrow is also in a process of transition. Having spent a lifetime with Woman, she has decided to separate from her. Her choice becomes the catalyst for Woman's death.

SCARECROW. Well, I've got news for you. You're not dying for him. You're leaving this earth because I have given up. (51)

This process of separation requires a significant ontological change in Scarecrow. She undergoes a physical transformation from her initial state, where we witnessed her embodied as a woman, into a hybrid creature that is half woman and half bird. Her transformation is linked to her negotiations with the Thing in the Wardrobe, a black-winged, clawed and beaked creature. It seems that Scarecrow fuses with the Thing, Carr's Angel of Death who has come to bring Woman into the realm of the dead.

The author appears to suggest that this transformation is a necessary part of a *rites de passage* that we are unfamiliar with. Scarecrow changes from an invisible but embodied female companion, to this hybrid creature who is to play a vital role in Woman's transition from life to death. Its task is to bring about a sort of post-Catholic Last Judgement at the close of Woman's life. Her transformation here is an important stage in Carr's delineated *rite de passage* of death in a post-Catholic Ireland. Scarecrow must undergo this transformation to bring Woman's life to a close, thus, freeing Scarecrow to carry on alone.

Scarecrow is therefore a liminal figure, living outside our frames of reference for ontological states, alive or dead, she skirts around the threshold of life, while leading Woman to death.

Liminal settings

The setting of both plays is liminal in that they deal with the ritual of the deathbed and disrupt notions of realism and time. In *Vita mia* and *Woman and Scarecrow*, the dying moments of a character are portrayed. Traditionally the deathbed scene is a moment of ritual in which family and friends gather to bid farewell to the moribund person, to observe and participate in final blessings and hear the final words of the dying. The deathbed is the site of ritual and not ceremony; Turner states that ritual is transformative and ceremony confirmatory (*Forest* 95). On the deathbed, the person transforms from a living entity to simply a corpse. The deathbed, therefore, can be seen as a site of transformation, a location of possibility.

The scene of a deathbed is one that has been depicted in the visual arts for centuries. Traditionally, it was regarded as important because of its reference to transformative possibilities. Philippe Ariès, in his book *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) discusses representations of the deathbed over time. In the early 1400s, the *Ars Moriendi*—a series of books with illustrations on how to die well—emerged, depicting a dying man in bed, surrounded by living family and friends, but also angels, devils and other supernatural beings (Virgin Mary, Trinity, Guardian Angel). Carr's deathbed scene, inhabited by living relatives as well as the supernatural figures of Scarecrow and the Thing in the Wardrobe replicates this scene in a secular mode. It reimagines the traditional scenes as a space where two worlds, the non-religious supernatural and the real co-exist.

Vita mia is a deathbed play that resists the conventions of the genre. Instead of presenting a traditional scene, with the dying person lying in bed, Dante's character is found outside the bed, alternately attracted to and repelled by it. The function of a deathbed ritual can vary. In *Vita mia* the ritual has a double function; it serves to reconcile the mother, brothers and indeed the wider community, in the form of the audience, to the tragic death of the little boy. As Italo Pardo notes, there is "a close relationship between the corpse, the soul and the state of the bereaved and the community" (105). The deathbed scene in this play records a transitional moment in

the boy's path (*rites de passage*) from accident to death, to wake, to funeral, and to burial. There is no reference to an after-life. This line of progress from the liminality of the deathbed to the confirmation of death in the funeral is challenged and disrupted by the mother in a vain attempt to arrest death.

In *Vita mia* and *Woman and Scarecrow*, the setting is that of a ritual, a liminal phase between life proper and death. In both, the conventions of the deathbed scene are utilized and resisted. The setting of the plays straddles the divide between fixed concepts, locating the action on the threshold. Both *Vita mia* and *Woman and Scarecrow* disrupt notions of realism. There are at least two different realms present in Carr's play. First there is the real world, in which Woman converses with her husband and aunt, and then there is the realm of the supernatural where she converses with Scarecrow and the Thing in the Wardrobe. In the latter moments, the strictures of realism are disrupted as Woman informs us that what we see is not necessarily what is happening. Early in the play, Woman states "I should write that down if I wasn't unconscious," though she seems conscious to the spectators (18). Later Scarecrow tells us that Woman is too weak to turn the pages of a dictionary and is almost blind (19), though our perception of Woman contradicts this. In *Vita mia*, the audience are aware that Chicco is dead, but what we see onstage, a bright and playful child, is at odds with reality. If the child is dead, then he cannot be so vibrantly lively. What the audience sees and perceives does not always conform to the rules of realist theatre.

In the new spaces created within the two plays, the traditional notion of time is undermined. In *Vita mia*, Dante refuses to follow a pattern of linear time, disrupting and playing with the order of events. What could be a story told in chronological fashion, beginning with Chicco's death and finishing with his wake, is deconstructed and remolded. Time in *Woman and Scarecrow* is unreal and intangible. Carr plays with it, making it seem suspended, fast-forwarded and rewound. It becomes flexible and malleable. However, in both plays it ultimately shows itself to be unstoppable.

Disruption of liminality

Death poses a threat to social order within societies, it disrupts and destabilizes. In their introduction to *Death and Representation* (1993) Elizabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin argue that death is an antagonist that challenges our systems of order (4). This threat can clearly be seen in *Vita Mia*, where the death of a young child violates society's expectation that a child should naturally outlive a parent. The violation of that expectation causes anguish and pain in the Mother, her sons and in the audience. Commenting on important rites of passage in life, Lloyd Warner states:

... the movement of a man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother's womb to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism – punctuated by a number of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark

with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community. These are the important times of birth, puberty, marriage and death. (qtd. in Turner, *Forest* 94)

As Chicco, in his short life, has only gone through one of these transitions, his mother is reluctant to allow him to progress to the final one and opposes the ritual that would bring him there.

The liminal state and condition, though a necessary part of any *rites de passage*, is challenged by Mother in *Vita mia* and Woman in Carr's play. In *Vita mia*, the ritual of preparing the boy for a wake is a key movement towards his funeral which will confirm his death. Although the Mother initially respects the tradition by preparing the wake bed, undressing and dressing her pyjamaed boy as a corpse and placing him on the deathbed, she is later moved to challenge and disrupt the process. Upon seeing the image of her son as a corpse, she doesn't know how to "sentirlo *suo* quell figlio morto" ("feel that dead boy to be her own"). She cannot accept his death as well as the continuing liminal state and ritual that represent and seek to confirm it. Therefore, she challenges both. Her attempts to bring Chicco back to life, after he lies stretched out on the deathbed are momentarily successful, but are stymied by the recurrence of his fatal accident. While her attempts to arrest the process are shown to be futile, she nevertheless refuses to proceed with the wake and funeral. Her other sons, Uccio and Gaspare join her and the now dead Chicco in the bed at the close of the play. The Mother, having failed in her resistance of the liminal phase, now seeks its indefinite continuation. She cannot accept the progression of the *rites de passage*, which concludes with the confirmation of the death and disappearance of her youngest son. The liminality of the setting then, remains indefinite at the close of the play.

Interestingly, Woman also seeks to prevent the progress of the *rites de passage*. Unlike Chicco, who is the victim of an accident, it is Woman who initiates the liminal phase through what is described as her "wilful jaunt to [her] doom" (33). We are led to understand that Woman's death was her own choice, an act of revenge on her husband (17). However, she soon becomes alarmed by the progress of the liminal phase, bringing her, as it does, closer to definitive death and she seeks to prolong it by negotiating with the Thing in the Wardrobe for more time. Her efforts, however, fail. The liminal period, once begun, cannot be indefinitely delayed, it comes to an end at the play's closing:

WOMAN. I think I've stopped breathing.

SCARECROW. Yes, it's over.

WOMAN. (*Throws herself on* SCARECROW) Oh, Scarecrow . . . the next breath isn't coming.

SCARECROW. And won't ever

And she dies in Scarecrow's arms. (68)

The end of the liminal phase signifies the arrival of definitive death. Woman was unsuccessful in prolonging liminality and dies. The Mother in *Vita mia* seeks its continuation, blocking any attempts to proceed to the next step in the *rites de passage*, the wake. She clasps her boys to her in the funeral bed, hoping to arrest the process of death. She fails. Though she and her two sons remain in the conditions of the liminal phase, it cannot be sustained; Chicco is dead.

Conclusion

The authors' focus on the liminal phase between life and death arrests and suspends the fleeting moment of death to allow us to consider this transition. The significance of this heightened concern with liminality is twofold. On the one hand, in the newly created space, outside of the binaries of life and death, real and unreal, natural and supernatural, the audience is facilitated in the examination and experience of grief, mourning, life and death. On the other, by staging the liminal phase between life and death, the play brings the taboo issue of death into the public sphere.

Both Sicilian and Irish societies are marked by the signs and symbols of a Christianity now largely forgotten. Neither play has any Christian or Catholic significance. Though the vestiges of Catholic belief systems remain in *Vita mia* and *Woman and Scarecrow* (crucifix, candles, rosary, priest), these symbols are not imbued with religious meaning. The plays then could be viewed as an investigation into the role of death in post-Catholic societies. Both writers use liminality to examine a new type of death experienced in a space that is no longer framed by Catholic ritual and ceremony. This is most clearly seen in Carr's use of the character Scarecrow, whom she deploys to enact a sort of secular Last Judgement on the dying Woman. In the final scene, Scarecrow asks a number of weighty questions of Woman about her life choices; her "sins" are calculated and certain truths about her life are revealed and acknowledged. Interestingly, the "sins" discussed are committed only against herself. The questionnaire that Scarecrow reads has been designed by Woman. In this post-Catholic model, a dying person no longer answers to a higher being, a God for her/his failings, but rather to her/himself.

The portrayal of this liminal ritual onstage, along with its accompanying pain and sorrow, also restores the issue of death to the public arena. Philippe Ariès in *Western Attitudes toward Death* (1976) and later, in *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) contends that in modern times a totally new model of death has rapidly and suddenly appeared in the technologically advanced regions of the Western world. In this new model, society has banished death from public discourse and has become a private act. In contrast to these developments, our authors do not seek to hide death but rather bring it to the spectators' attention, carrying grief and personal loss into the public sphere. The suspension and contemplation of modern death onstage provides us with a space in which to develop a new vocabulary with which to talk about our one truly common experience.

Both writers use the state of liminality to suspend, observe, illustrate, and investigate the fleeting moment that ends each and every life—death. Victor Turner describes the condition of liminality as “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (*Ritual* 97). Emma Dante and Marina Carr use this liminal realm as an imaginative and creative space in which to portray the great passions in life such as grief, pain, and mourning and to restore the theme of death to public discourse. The liminal space they have created facilitates the exploration of such themes in a singular fashion. *Vita mia* and *Woman and Scarecrow* elicit unexpected emotions, thoughts, and ideas in the spectator who is present at the deathbeds of Chicco and Woman.

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