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"It Lurks in the Saying, Not What's Being Said":
Gender Performativity and Possible Worlds Theory in Marina Carr's 'Low in the Dark'

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Abstract
Low in the Dark by Irish playwright Marina Carr is an absurdist play that focuses heavily on concepts of gender as performance. It does so mainly through role-playing scenes in which two same-gender characters reenact a heterossexual relationship. These scenes can be tied to Marie-Louise Ryan's conceptions of the four kinds of textual alternative possible worlds (TAPWs) within possible worlds theory: fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge. An analysis of the play's role-playing scenes in conjunction with gender performativity and these four types of APWs reveals the constructed-ness of gender norms within the work, which further calls into question a strictly policed gender binary both in the world of the text and our own world. Further, the relationship between Carr's work surrounding the gender binary calls into question the nature of what makes her work absurd: not the mismatch between the characteristics of gender performance that we observe in Low in the Dark, but rather the absurdity of a strictly enforced gender binary itself.

The Play
Setting: “Stage left bizarre bathroom: bath, toilet and shower. A touch with hot and cold runs on it. Stage right: The men’s space: tyres, ems, undressed walls and blankets drawn around!” (Car 1).

Characters: Bender, “In her thirties, attractive by aging,” Bender, Bender’s daughter, in her mid-twenties, a spilt boot, ‘whimsical’. Baster, “In his mid-twenties, Curtains’ lover.” Bone, “In his late twenties, Binder’s lover.” Curtains “can be any age, as she is covered from head to toe in heavy, brocaded thirties, Curtains’ lover;” Bone, “in his late twenties, Binder’s lover;” Binder’s partner of another gender.

Repeating Narrative Element: Role Play
Baster: Do you like my lipstick?
Bone: Of course I will.
Baster: And my socks!
Bone: Yes.
Baster: Want a baby.
Bone: So do I.
Baster: Will you buy me a present?
Bone: Of course I will.
Baster: Want a bath.
Bone: You want to help me.
Baster: No, you do.
Bone: Yes, you do, you women are all the same.” (Car 42).

"Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender care, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality" (Butler 136).

Conclusions
The role-playing scenes in Low in the Dark function as all four types of TAPWs: fantasy, wishes, obligations, and knowledge. All of this is possible through the absurdist nature of gender performance. When we see that gender so integrally forms much of these types of TAPWs in the role-playing scenes, we can also see the ways in which gender in the actual world functions as each of these types. Now, experience gender as if it were a fantasy or wish for ourselves and others, or possibly an obligation in a socially regulated framework, in which the role functions or a reaction to or display of our knowledge is gender performance. In this way, when we interact with gender in our everyday lives, we are interacting with our own and other people’s APWs, not something necessarily external or “natural” in a sense of “non-constructedness.” Some of us, too, may participate in our own forms of role-play as we come to terms with our fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge worlds in regards to gender performance.

Still, the gender performances of Low in the Dark may look absurd in comparison to our own notions of gender, but differences in notions of gender performance between the actual world and the world of the text are not what makes Low in the Dark absurd, or at least it should not be. After all, when we think past some of the staging aspects of the play, we might even recognize some elements of our own world within the text spaces explored by us, obligatory heterosexuality, and the absurdity of a strict gender binary itself. What we can gather from the play instead is that gender functions in the play much as it does in the actual world, although some of its literal manifestations may look different. When we consider gender performance as a function of TAPWs, either fantasy, wish, obligation, or knowledge, we put it into the realm of the play. Gender in this case becomes separate from how it is interpreted by the outside world, and we see the fate of the literal manifestations of gender-specific to Venice Carr’s Low in the Dark, but rather in the fact that the roles gender as separate from the Dark and in the realm of the Dark in accordance with Butler’s notions of the distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (136). The meaning of the play lies in the fact that Carr makes the distinction through obliquely, not in the harshest between our own conceptions of gender performance and those of the play. In the words of the play itself, “It lies in the Vortex, not what’s being said” (Car 99).