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“It Lurks in the Saying, Not What’s Being Said”: Possible Worlds Theory and Gender
Performativity in Marina Carr’s *Low in the Dark*

by

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A woman giving birth over and over again in a bathtub, a twenty-foot scarf knitted by a man carrying a pregnancy to term on his shoulder, a woman dressed from head to toe in thick window drapes: these are but a few of the absurd elements of Marina Carr's 1989 Irish play *Low in the Dark*, directed by Philip Hardy, performed by the Crooked Sixpence Theatre Company, and starring Brid Mhic Fheari, Joan Brosnan Walsh, Sarah Jane Scaife,¹ Peter Holmes, and Dermot Moore. Absurdism as a genre has proven throughout the years to be difficult to classify. Some scholars have posited that theater of the absurd liberates its textual universe from logical incompatibility with the real world (Ryan 32). Others, like the author of the conference paper "Why Get Upset Over a Few Cases of Rhinoceritis?," Katerina Vassilopoulou, have suggested that it has more to do with the ways in which characters respond to absurdist elements than logical fallacy (167). Still others, as depicted in Michael Y. Bennet's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature of the Absurd* recognize the near-impossibility of defining absurdism and instead turn to certain qualities of a work, such as lack of exposition, flattening of the narrative arc, and ambiguous endings (19). As such, *Low in the Dark* (*LitD*) is perhaps difficult to formally classify as absurdism. While it does contain examples of flattened narrative arc and lack of exposition, it does not contain examples of logical incompatibility with the real world, i.e., principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle.²

What can be said for certain, however, is that the play is strange. Really strange. The stage is described as halved into a 'women's section' and a 'men's section,' the former consisting of a "bizarre bathroom: bath, toilet and shower. A brush with hat and tails on it" (Carr 5). Stage right, the men's section, is made up of "tyres, rims, unfinished walls and blocks strewn about" (Carr 5). There are five characters total in the play: Bender is described

¹ Also spelled Sarahjane Scaife.

² Principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle say that in logic, if there is a proposition X, then either X or not-X is true and the other is ruled out (Vassilopolou 157).

as “in her fifties, attractive but ageing;” Binder is “Bender’s daughter, in her mid-twenties, a spoilt brat, whimsical;” Baxter is “in his mid-thirties, Curtains’s lover;” Bone is “in his late-twenties, Binder’s lover;” and finally Curtains, who “can be any age, as she is covered from head to toe in heavy brocaded curtains and rail. Not an inch of her face or body is seen throughout the play” (Carr 5). In general, it seems as though the characters remain confined to their gendered spaces except when they are with their lovers, as in the case of Binder and Bone, or unless they have followed Curtains, who seems able to visit both spaces freely in spite of her designation by the other characters as a woman, specifically the “curtain woman” (Carr 25).

No real plot ensues, hence the “flattening of the narrative arc,” although the play contains several repeating narrative elements. Bender gives birth several times throughout the play in spite of her age, and she consistently fights with Binder about fertility. Eventually, Baxter and Bone are also impregnated by Curtains and Binder respectively, and it is implied that Binder has also given birth at some point as well. Curtains never becomes pregnant, but throughout the story we witness her relationship with Baxter, and we occasionally see Binder and Bone interact in a way that implies that they have some sort of agreed-upon romantic or sexual relationship. Just as the work itself seems to have no classic plot, Curtains tells a story throughout the play of “the man and the woman” who meet and ensue on senseless adventures that also have no apparent narrative arc. The four other characters participate in the story by listening, adding on to it, interrupting it, and arguing with each other and Curtains about it. Perhaps one of the most notable narrative elements in the play, however, is role-playing scenes in which Bender, Binder, Baxter, and Bone all partake. The role-playing scenes consist of two characters of the same gender, i.e., Bender and Binder, or Baxter and Bone, acting out scenes between heterosexual couples with one of them playing themselves and the other playing a partner of a different gender. For example, in one of the opening scenes

between Baxter and Bone, Bone plays a traditional male figure as he builds a wall in the men's space. Baxter plays the "niggling female" in this scenario, knitting a twenty-foot scarf and baking buns for Bone as he does physical labor (Carr 18). Curtains is never acted out in role-play, although at one point Bone asks "Do you want me to do Curtains?," which Baxter refuses (Carr 41). This fact seems to further cement Curtains's place outside of the gender binary as set up by the other characters, although their "criteria" for identifying gender is unclear throughout the play.

The role-playing scenes in the play function as what literary theory of possible worlds calls textual alternative possible worlds, or TAPWs. Possible worlds theory, as explained by literary theorists like Marie-Laure Ryan in her work *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, is a theory of fiction that posits that texts can be approached as ontological entities that are possible in their own right as they are in the text (Ryan 16-21). To readers in the actual world (AW), each text like *LitD* is an alternative possible world (APW) that becomes accessible through a reading or a viewing of the text: "In fiction, the writer relocates to what is for us a mere possible world, and makes it the center of an alternative system of reality. If this recentering is indeed the gesture constitutive of fiction... [fictional worlds] refer to a system whose actual world is from an absolute point of view an APW" (Ryan 24). For readers or viewers of a work of fiction, then, through another act of that aforementioned recentering, the private, inner worlds of the characters themselves become textual alternative possible worlds (TAPWs). For the sake of this argument, Ryan makes a case for four main categories of TAPWs: fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge (32, 111-119). While it may seem that these types of TAPWs would function separately, in fact these role-playing scenes function as each of these types of TAPWs simultaneously, especially when considered in conjunction with gender. As conflicts arise between different the TAPWs of different characters in regards to gender, they reveal gender as a function of

each character's imagination in the play rather than purely an outside force to which they conform.

In fact, Carr's role-playing scenes bear a striking resemblance to theories of gender performativity posited by Judith Butler in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler argues that gender has no basis in objectivity, rather that it is an imitative act toward a normative ideal that becomes internalized as identity, not simply a description of a universal, binary experience based on the sex of the physical body (16). In the words of Butler herself, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, or a natural sort of being" (33). Some have argued that theories of gender performativity function as transgender erasure and could only apply within the gender binary as it already exists within certain contexts. This argument is understandable, as linking gender only to external attributes and presentation would be reductionist at best and certainly would ring of cis-normativity in some respects. However, Butler also posits a distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance that is essential to an understanding of gender in a play like *LitD* (137).

For the purposes of this essay, the basis of gender performativity theory attempts to use the gender binary against itself. While the theory does apply mainly to cis-gendered people, those are the people who exist within the constructed gender binary that Butler seeks to dismantle in the first place for its insufficiency in the lives of real people regardless of gender. Because the characters of *LitD*, or at least those who participate in the role-playing scenes, are seemingly cis-gendered based on their references to each other as men and women, Butler's theories can still operate in this context as she critiques the gender binary as experienced by cis-gendered people. Butler also speaks to experiences of gender that apply in real life and to the characters in the following quote from *Gender Trouble*:

To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside in a binary that counterposes the “real” and the “authentic” as oppositional. As a genealogy of gender ontology, this inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of “the real” and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization. (32-33)

In other words, the goal of gender performativity theory is not to invalidate one’s gender identity, but rather to inspect how gender identity has come to represent something naturally real and binary. In doing so, Butler exposes the fallacy of an objective and strictly policed gender binary based on sex and/or identity. Rather, she de-binarizes gender in general through a critique of the binary between the authentic and the artificial that is produced and policed through a social framework centered on gender (Butler 32-33).³

This socially regulated framework is especially easy to spot in *LitD*’s role-playing scenes, especially between the cis-gendered characters who participate in these scenes. The characters in these instances are literally performing gender, though it is not always their own that they perform. Thus, they perform gender in a way that is a literal manifestation of Butler’s theory, and the phrase “gender performance” in this case means something that runs parallel to that theory and includes all of the internalized and assumed performative aspects of any gender but does not always speak to a character’s identity. As such, the characters rely on heavily gendered symbols such as knitting, baking, and wearing dresses and high heels for

³ For information on various reactions to Butler’s theories of gender performativity, see Dennis Schep’s “The Limits of Performativity: A Critique of Hegemony in Gender Theory.” Although Schep posits transgender identity as binary and ‘essentialist,’ which is not true for everyone, the writing on Butler’s theory in regards to certain aspects of some transgender experiences can be enlightening. Also see Lise Nelson’s “Bodies (and Spaces) do Matter: The Limits of Performativity” for information on the limits of Butler’s theories in regards to context and intentional human identity practices.

women and physical labor for men, things that are based on assumed performative aspects of those genders. Their literal performances here are then regulated in the form of interruptions to the role-playing process when the character playing a different gender than their own makes a mistake in the role-play and is called out by the character playing themselves. In the first role-playing scene between Baxter and Bone, the following interruptions ensue:

Baxter: (*real Baxter, throws down the knitting*) I'm fed up of this! It's pointless!

Bone: (*determined to finish the scenario, as before, points to the wall*) I do everything to please you!

He waits for the response from Baxter. None is forthcoming. He forces the knitting into Baxter's hand, annoyed.

Yes you do darling!

Baxter: Yes you do, darling.

Bone: And I love you for it!

Baxter: And I love you for it.

Bone: Now would you like some tea?

Baxter: Now would you like some tea?

Bone knocks off Baxter's hat.

Baxter: You always end it like this!

Bone: You always force me to! If you'd just say what you're supposed to say.

Baxter: (*taking off women's clothes and shoes*) Women don't talk like that! (Carr 19)

In this scene, Baxter, playing a woman, interrupts the scene's progression by claiming its pointlessness and ridding himself of a severely exaggerated symbol of femininity, the twenty-foot scarf he has been knitting throughout the play. Bone, offended that Baxter would interrupt the role-play, dictates to him what he is supposed to say when acting as a woman, which includes agreeing with the male figure and offering him tea as. As he ends the role-

play, he cites Baxter as the reason that he is being cruel, his words disturbingly resembling a typical defense of often gendered violence through victim blaming. Baxter, on the other hand, exhibits frustration with the inauthenticity of the gender performance that Bone requests of him. Thus, both characters in this role-play have their own ideas of what a “correct” gender performance might look like and find themselves frustrated by the other’s conceptions of gender, although neither of them actually identify as the women they claim to imitate. While the social framework of correct gender performance in this scene is anything but decided, it is strictly enforced by each character based on their own imaginations of gender.

As mentioned, in this essay, the role-playing scenes will be referred to as TAPWs, although the reasoning behind that assertion may not be totally apparent at first. After all, if an TAPW from the TAW perspective is a private world, then how does a social act such as role-playing fit into that category? For one thing, these role-playing exercises do take place in private to some degree, although that does not automatically place them in a private TAPW for a character. However, in the above role-playing scene especially, the differences between the criteria for a correct gender performance reveal that the notions of gender being enacted function largely on a private scale for the characters. There is also evidence to suggest that these role-playing scenes are often enactments of former or hypothetical situations between one character and an actual partner they have had. In a separate scene between Baxter and Bone before they begin role-playing, they decide who will play whom:

Bone: Do you want me to do Curtains?

Baxter: No.

Bone: OK, the Pink Sock [Baxter and Bone’s nickname for Binder]! (*Hands Baxter the pink sock*).

Baxter: (*puts the sock on his hand like a glove*) I don’t know what she says.

Bone: Make it up, come on.

Baxter: (*woman's voice*) Do you like my lipstick? (Carr 41-42)

In this scene, Bone seems willing to accept a less exact performance from Baxter than in the former scene. However, the characters involved are Bone and an actual figure in his life, the Pink Sock. Bone now has the opportunity to enact hypothetical scenarios in which he interacts with the Pink Sock, an activity into which he practically has to coerce Baxter. From this scene we glean that the role-playing scenes exist for the purposes of only one of the characters, in this case Bone. Baxter is uninterested in the scene, which contains no figures from his own life, thus the activity is imaginative only for Bone. Although Baxter has the opportunity here to create his own dialogue, it is for the enjoyment of Bone and only Bone, whose imagination is enacted to enrich his internal world, an APW from his perspective and a TAPW from that of the reader/viewer.

In a later role-playing scene between Bender and Binder, the following dialogue occurs with a similar theme:

Binder: I've done [this role-playing scene] a hundred times!

Bender: Please, Binder... just once more, for me.

Binder: (*puts [hat and tails] back on*) Well, make it quick!... The stars are there too, they'll be there long after this planet has turned to dust.

Bender: (*breaking their arm link*) He never said that!

Binder: Well, I'm saying it.

Bender: Keep to the rules! Go on. (Carr 35-36)

Later, when Binder says another incorrect line, Bender exclaims, "No! That comes later, much later and his tone was never that harsh" (Carr 36). The main difference between this scene and the former is the content: this scene appears to be a re-enactment rather than an enactment as in the case of Baxter and Bone. In this case, the interruptions to the scene are not caused by Binder, but rather by Bender, who feels not that the gender of Binder's

character has not been enacted properly, but that the re-enactment is not accurate enough to what she remembers—or perhaps rather what she wants to remember. Thus, in this case even more explicitly than in the former, Binder acts as a pawn in re-enacting the private memory and/or fantasy belonging to her mother. She, too, is coerced into the transaction, citing that she has reenacted this scene “hundreds of times,” placing the scene even more firmly into the private realm of Bender’s imagination.

Role-playing scenes such as these throughout the work become more complex, however, when we consider the different types of TAPWs that a text can utilize. As mentioned, these types as posited by Ryan are as follows: obligation worlds (O-worlds), wish worlds (W-worlds), knowledge worlds (K-worlds), and fantasy universes (F-universes) that include fantasy worlds (F-worlds) within them (111-119).⁴⁵ These TAPWs create conflict in a text when there is some kind of metaphorical gap between one TAPW and either another TAPW of the same or a different variety, a gap between TAPWs of any category between characters, or a gap between a character’s TAPW and the textual actual world (TAW) (Ryan 121-123). In a text with a classic narrative arc, a story emerges from a character attempting to close the gaps between the different types of TAPWs to create peace within their own inner world (Ryan 123). In a text without a classic narrative plot, there may never be a narrative

⁴ Ryan also posits the existence of intent worlds (I-worlds), which constitute a character’s goals and plans, although she separates I-worlds as a function of plot rather than a modal TAPW, as in the case of O-, W-, and K-worlds and F-universes (124). The same goes for Ryan’s concept of pretended worlds through which a character tricks another character (118-119). These function as a separate branch of TAPWs that form “mock” O-, W-, and K-worlds and F-universes that seem closely related to I-worlds as plot devices rather than modal worlds (Ryan 123).

⁵ Fantasy universes are referred to as “universes” rather than “worlds” because they are not simply satellites of the world of the text, but rather can be accessed through a character’s recentering through elements like dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, and fictions that contain infinite possibilities and depth (Ryan 119). Each example of one of these elements, however, creates an F-world that is “surrounded by the private worlds of its inhabitants” (Ryan 119). This essay will focus on F-worlds as they appear in *LitD*, as written access to full F-universes for a reader of any one piece of fiction is impossible.

remedy for conflicts between different TAPWs and other worlds, but in the TAPWs of *LitD* at least, several gaps exist in each of these capacities and in each type of TAPW. Since the role-playing scenes function as every type of TAPW simultaneously through the avenue of gender performance, they display the gaps between gendered TAPWs and the rest of the play's narrative worlds to posit gender itself as the main conflict of the play.

Perhaps the most obvious TAPW reflected in the role-playing is that of the fantasy world, or F-world, as each role-playing scene acts as part of at least one character's imagination that diverges from the TAW. Even though two characters partake in each role-play, as we have seen in the scenes between Baxter and Bone, and Binder and Bender, the person role-playing as themselves seems in control for the most part of the scene. In some cases, as in the following scene, that person dictates to the other exactly what to say, albeit to some confusion:

Baxter: (*sitting again*) You said you want to finish with me.

Bone: And I do.

Baxter: (*gets up again*) All the best so.

Bone: No, that's not what she'd say! She'd say, 'Don't leave me.' She's say, 'I need you Bone.'

Baxter: I need you Bone.

Bone: You don't.

Baxter: Alright, I don't.

Bone: No! You do.

Baxter: I do.

Bone: You don't.

Baxter: I don't.

Bone: You do!

Baxter: I don't!

Bone: You do!

Baxter: No, you need me!

Bone: Me? I don't need anybody. (Carr 42-43)

Here, Bone dictates to Baxter what he wants him to say acting as the Pink Sock. Baxter reiterates the plea, at which point Bone appears to be trying to argue with the Pink Sock by saying that she does not need him. Baxter then takes his argument to be a correction of his role-play performance, which Bone appears to then correct again. They go on like this for several more lines before Baxter breaks from Bone's instruction and insists that he as the Pink Sock does not need Bone, but rather Bone needs the Pink Sock. Here, Bone's corrections toward Baxter and his attempts to then argue with the Pink Sock undoubtedly cause some confusion, but ultimately, he is trying to both act in the role-play and control it at the same time, therefore enacting his own ultimate fantasy that Baxter's objections appear to interrupt.

On the other hand, Baxter participates in a fantasy or an F-world as well. When he reiterates and then eventually objects to Bone's demands on his lines, he does so as the character of the Pink Sock. From Bone's perspective, Bone participates in a fantasy in which his fantasy self interacts with the Pink Sock. Although he cannot fully control the fantasy, he does have some say in the way that it goes as he gives instruction to Baxter. From Baxter's perspective, Baxter interacts with Bone as a fantasy version of the Pink Sock. He does not merely give prompts to Bone to fantasize with, but rather he comes to embody the Pink Sock by imitating her voice, dressing in "women's clothes," and using phrases that he believes a woman would use as though he identifies as a woman himself, all for the purpose of his role in Bone's fantasy role-play.

The same goes for Binder and Bender in their own role-playing scenes. At times they correct each other just as Bone does Baxter in the above scene, reinforcing the private fantasy/ies inherent in the role-playing scenes. According to Matt O'Brien in his article "Always the Best Man, Never the Groom: The Role of the Fantasy Male in Marina Carr's Plays," Carr's pieces often include something of an ideal fantasy male:

This 'Best Man' will have a number of characteristics desired by the female protagonists... But these 'Best Men' are never direct players in the onstage action. They've vanished before the lights go up, leaving those men who *are* on display to deal with the idealized worlds hanging back in the shadows around them. When confronted with these 'ideal men,' the on-stage men find themselves puny in comparison. (202)

This is true of *LitD* as well, though I argue that the 'Best Man' trope goes both ways and applies to the female characters as well. Take, for example, when the men and women characters are actually forced to interact with each other:

Binder: How is the knitting?

Bone: Grand, grand. How is the baby?

Binder: Acting up. Another bun?

Bone: Men always cry when they conceive.

Binder: And the wall?

Bone: I suppose it's an emotional time for them.

Binder: And how are you? (Carr 60)

For the first couple of lines, the scene appears to make sense. After line three however, the two characters forego any sensical communication. Binder and Bone plainly begin talking past each other and using repeated phrases from former role-playing scenes (i.e., "Grand, grand. And how is the baby?," and "And how are you?," and "[Men or women] always cry

when they conceive”) alongside lines ripe with gendered references to baking and wall building. While the role-playing scenes tend to make some semblance of sense, when the lines from these role-playing scenes are used in reality on figures of another gender, the result is, for lack of a better word, absurd, revealing the role-plays as being separate from the TAW. Yet each character’s insistent policing of the correct gender performance through the usage of these lines makes it clear that these role-playing scenes function as the enactment of private fantasy related to gender specifically.

In the words of Butler, “The alternative perspective on identification that emerges from psychoanalytic theory suggests that multiple and coexisting identifications produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender configurations which contest the fixity of masculine and feminine placements with respect to paternal law [binary gender roles]” (67). Because of the gender-singular world that our characters inhabit, they do not identify as more than one gender, but they come to identify certain behaviors as gendered through their experiences in role-play, which they then fail to reconcile with the behaviors that they actually see other characters of that gender performing. Thus, when our characters come into contact with a character of a different gender and revert to the fantasy words and actions they have experienced in role-play, they experience a sort of dissonance that the audience can see through their nonsensical conversations. In effect, the conflict of the play through gendered fantasy, one that never truly gets resolved, emerges through incongruence between the F-world of role-play and (a.) the F-world of the other character in the role-play interrupting the fantasy in order to dispute the terms of the gendered fantasy, and/or (b.) the TAW of the play that features the actuality of the other gender involved.

We have already seen how gendered expectations based off of fantasy have created an idealized F-world in regards to gender, and that idealization can translate here into desires or wishes, i.e., the wish world or W-world of a character. In many of the romantic scenarios

involving supposed past partners that we see Bender and Binder role-play, it is clear that the opposing character is functioning not only as a fiction or a character in an F-world, but also as a wish for an idealized partner in overly romanticized fashion. Take the following scene for example:

Bender: Say it!

Binder: I love you.

Bender: Have you said it to others?

Binder: Hundreds, and I'll go on saying it. I'll say it a million times. I'll even say it when I don't mean it. I'll yell it to the space between the branches, I'll whisper it as they nail the lid on.

Bender: That's exactly how he said it.

Binder: (*taking off hat*) Must've been a rare tulip.

Bender: None rarer, none rarer. (Carr 37-38)

In this example, which contains more than a hint of nihilism, it is clear that the language is exaggerated and romanticized with a sort of reckless abandon that Bender seems attached to, indicated by her words of approval at the end of the role-play. Although she claims "that's exactly how he said it," her sentimentalized claim that there was no one in the world like this man gives her away as someone dealing more in wishful thinking than in reality. We also see this in Binder's role-play as an Italian man that she and Bender see out of their window, which clearly functions both as an imaginary fantasy and as a wish for Bender, or even a wish from Binder toward her mother (Carr 66-67). Thus, the wishful thinking of Bender's W-world in either case does not depend on her personal relationship to the opposing character in question. Especially since she does not know the Italian man, her enactment of romantic fantasy with him with him clearly functions as both her W-world and her F-world.

On the other hand, the W-worlds of the role-playing scenes also apply to the gendered wishes that the characters may have for themselves. Sarah Jane Scaife, who played Binder in the first staging of the play, writes in her piece “Mutual Beginnings: Marina Carr’s *Low in the Dark*,” “The characters represented general patterns of human behavior and desires. The women represented the presumed female concerns such as reproduction and attracting men; the men the preoccupations of finding, keeping, and to some extent understanding their particular women, whilst maintaining their building role with the wall” (11). It seems, then, that the wishes exhibited by each character in the role-playing scenes may be closely related to that character’s W-world for themselves. These wishes, while involved with another respective gender, also focus closely on the gender roles of the main character in question. The result of these self-involved wishes are role-playing scenes such as the one in which Bender gives birth while Binder acts as the indifferent husband (Carr 15-16), or the role-play in which Bone builds a wall for Baxter’s female character while Baxter knits and talks about cooking (Carr 16-19). In these scenes, the main character’s actions, i.e., giving birth or building a wall, stand in response to the gender of the opposite character, who acts the part of the perhaps less-than-ideal partner in these cases. The W-world consists here of the main characters’ wishes for themselves in the ways they interact with characters of another gender.

W-worlds, then, can act as either a wish for one’s self in regards to gender performance and/or a wish for the ‘fantasy [insert gender]’ of the opposite character. Given the similarities between the role-playing scenes as F-world and W-world, it is clear that the main source of conflict in these scenes as W-world arises from discrepancies between them and the TAW, mainly in the form of nonsensical interactions between characters of different genders as we have already observed. Either the main character finds their wishes for those of another gender unfulfilled as they fail to interact with them, or they find their own gender performance lacking within the same circumstances. Even in role-plays that seem to lack

fulfillment for the characters, the wish for normativity and romance at whatever cost is undermined by the TAW coupled with the characters' own non-normative behavior in that world.

In regards to wishes, Butler states, "Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality" (136). As the W-worlds of *LitD* are literally acted out in the role-playing scenes, gender becomes something inherent to each character, further justifying blanket statements like "Women don't talk like that" (Carr 19) or "Men always cry when they conceive" (Carr 60). From Butler's viewpoint, the illusion of binary gender exhibited in examples such as these further serve the purposes of obligatory reproductive heterosexuality.

Thus, we are thrust into the world of obligation, or the O-world, of *LitD*. We see obligation most clearly in the role-plays in the fact that often one of the characters within the scene is being coerced by the other, as we have already witnessed in many of the previous role-playing examples. What they are actually being obligated to do, however, is act out a gender other than their own. Often, what they end up acting out are things often seen as gendered obligations, such as baking, knitting, and giving birth, or manual physical labor. The further reasoning behind these obligations is embedded in the compulsion to partake in actual heterosexual relationships, none of which seem particularly fulfilling in the play. The obligation, however, remains, and each character must cope with the fact in a way that is socially acceptable. Based on the number of role-playing scenes between characters of the same gender, it seems clear that role-playing heterosexuality with a same-gender partner is a socially acceptable way in this TAW to cope with the lack of fulfillment that each character experiences in their actual heterosexual relationships, whether they act out a wish or a similarly unfulfilling fantasy.

In some scenes between Baxter and Bone, there even appears to be some confusion about whether they are role-playing as heterosexual couples or are somehow involved themselves. When Bone becomes pregnant late in the play, he and Baxter talk seriously of raising the child together (Carr 68-69). While they may not necessarily be romantically inclined toward each other, they do partake in a family structure often reserved in normative Western society for heterosexual couples. Regardless of this relationship, they retain the guise of heterosexuality through their relationships with women in the play as well as their role-playing together as heterosexual couples, though at times their role-playing is hard to distinguish from how the two men actually interact with each other, considering their bickering about raising children and talk of knitting and baking that we also see in role-play. Thus, the necessity of heterosexuality in the role-playing scenes can only be exemplified through the strict adherence to each character's conceptions of correct gender performance.

Other scenes further cement the obligation involved in role-play itself, such as those in which a character participates in a role-playing scene as two differently gendered characters by themselves. Take for example the following scene:

Bone enters, hugely pregnant, wearing one high-heel shoe and one man's shoe. He looks at the wall, looks at the knitting then makes a decision.

Bone: A brick! (*He lays a brick.*) A stitch! (*He knits a stitch.*) A brick! (*He lays another brick.*) A stitch! (*another stitch*) A brick! A stitch! (Carr 67)

Interestingly, an almost identical scene occurs featuring Bender directly before Bone's scene:

Binder: (*throws hat at her*) Do it yourself so.

Bender: (*picks up hat, slams it on her head and takes on a male pose.*) Listen, I have my work. (*Takes off the hat.*) What about me? (*hat back on*) Don't I spend all the time I can with you? (*hat off*) It's not enough, I miss you. (*hat on*) I miss you too. (*hat off*) That's a lie. (*hat on*) It's not. (*hat off*) It is. (*hat on*) It's not. (*hat off*) It is. (*hat on*) It's

not. (*hat on and off at accelerated speed*) 'Tis, not, 'tis, not, 'tisnot, 'tisnot, etc.

(*Eventually she throws the hat off.*) Ah, go to hell! (Carr 66)

In both of these scenes, neither character seems to be having an especially pleasant experience role-playing, and yet they do so frantically in spite of the fact, which seems to point to the obligatory nature of role-playing in the world of the text. Notably, each character uses different objects to signify a change in gender: bricks and stitches for Bone and the hat for Bender. The necessity of these objects for each of them further points to, beyond the obligation of heterosexuality, the obligation to perform gender in a material way to conform to the acceptable standards for role-playing and gender that they all exhibit throughout the piece. The performance of gender, then, is posited in this work as a necessity for functioning in society as well as in role-play, which itself functions as an obligation.

As such, conflict in the O-world of role-play seems to stem from a few places: a character's refusal or inability to participate, which leads to frantic solo role-play; the lack of fulfillment in obligatory heterosexual relationships; and even in the incongruity between the normative, policed structure of the role-playing scenes and the subversive nature of partaking in these scenes with someone of the same gender. In much the same way that Butler states that binary gender performance itself is a form of obligation in a heterosexual matrix (136), Carr's role-playing scenes tack on extra layers of obligation to reinforce the obligatory nature of gender in a heteronormative society like that of the play as well as the actual world, our own AW.

Of course, all of these worlds, F-worlds, W-worlds, and O-worlds, are inextricably linked to the world of each character's knowledge: their K-world. Simply put, the ways in which the characters interact with different approaches to gender performance that they experience in the role-playing scenes stem directly from their knowledge of how gender should be performed in the first place. It follows, then, that when characters argue about

correct gender performance by correcting each other, and when characters do not meet the gendered expectations placed on them by others, the K-world of the opposing character is fundamentally challenged, resulting in a conflict. We see a conflict like this arise at one point between Baxter and Bone:

Baxter: *(taking off women's clothes and shoes)* Women don't talk like that!

Bone: That one did! *(unsure)* How do women talk? (Carr 19)

Bone's hesitance after he proclaims that he knows how women talk reveals the conflict that he experiences in regards to a shift in his K-world. Yet, there is little to no evidence that suggests that Baxter's claims are valid, either. After all, he later exclaims that the mark of a woman's speech is that "there's no sense in anything they say, ever" while meanwhile, nothing he says himself makes sense either (Carr 19). Thus, conceptions of binary gender performance in the TAW may not completely align with even Baxter's assertions, establishing a potential gap between his K-world and the TAW that function as his unrealized subjective belief system (Ryan 114).

It is important to mention that the K-world of the characters in regards to race also briefly comes into play during one of the role-playing scenes:

Bender: *(resigned)* Which one?

Binder: *(hands her a red scarf)* The black musician...

Bender: OK, OK.

She gets out of the bath. Binder puts on lipstick, and checks herself in the mirror. She walks into middle space and stands there demurely. Music starts playing, reggae.

Bender walks over, a jaunty black walk.

(into Binder's ear) Hi, baby cake, you wanna jive with me a while?

Binder: Sorry?

Bender: You wanna dance?

She doesn't wait for a reply, she takes Binder's hand and they move a few steps.

Dance. Bender the confident rhythm of most blacks when they dance, Binder self-consciously.

Well, you ain't no New Yorker, honey.

Binder: Irish.

Bender: Say what?

Binder: From Ireland.

Bender: I'd never have guessed. My grandmother's Irish.

Binder: (*suspiciously*) Is she? (Carr 75-76)

This passage deals with two different ethnic and/or racial identities: that of “Blackness” and “Irishness” that seem in this case to be placed in a binary. Two beliefs within Binder’s K-world are on display here when she questions the opposing character’s claim to Irish ethnicity: (a.) Black people are not Irish, and (b.) Irish people are not Black. We also see Bender’s K-world regarding race in the way that she interprets the stage directions “*a jaunty black walk*” and in “*the confident way of most blacks when they dance.*” While these stage directions would not be available to the audience, the change in Bender’s movements could be interpreted racially, as Binder has asked Bender to play the character of, not a musician, but of a Black musician specifically. Yet, Binder and Bender’s K-worlds in regard to race and ethnicity likely do not cause much conflict in these characters’ private APWs, considering that those subjects are not mentioned at any other point in the text with which one can compare this scene. Thus, Bender and Binder are likely operating in this role-play using racial stereotypes, especially given the totalizing phrase “*most blacks*” and the use of “*black*” as a descriptor of something as individual as movement. A conflict would only arise, then, between the K-worlds of Bender and Binder and the K-world of an audience that recognizes a potential use of racial stereotype. That is all to say that role-playing gender performance, in

this case a performance of a different gender *and* race, can reside more so in a character's beliefs within their K-world than necessarily the TAW or AW.

Since this racialized knowledge functions for these characters as part of a belief system, we can also consider this racialized performance as a function of fantasy, wish, and obligation in regards to both gender and race as well. Presuming that the musician is a man, given that all of the other role-play scenes feature heterosexual couples, Bender here is acting out her conceptions, or K-world, regarding Black men specifically through a fantasy, or F-world, situation. Here, Bender's and Binder's performances are not only a part of Bender's belief system, but given that she requests this scene in particular, it also seems part of Binder's wish world. The intersection, too, between race and gender becomes obligatory in this context of Irish—which to these characters means “not Black”—heteronormativity if the characters act in the role-play based on stereotype. Race is not written into the roles of any characters other than the Black musician, positing the Irish ethnicity of at least Binder, and likely the others, as a sort of neutral ethnic and racial zone to these characters that does not have any further demarcation. In this case, then, being Irish is considered as normative as heterosexual relationships are in the play. As such, heterosexual male Blackness in this role-play still establishes gendered racial stereotypes as a normative, and therefore obligatory, performance of race in conjunction with gender. As such, this role-play scene in particular exhibits how race interacts with gender roles to produce a fantasy or wish, which to these characters is an obligation based on their stereotyped knowledge of gender specific to race.

We have gathered, then, evidence that the role-playing scenes in *LitD* function as all four of the main types of TAPWs: fantasy, wishes, obligations, and knowledge. All of this is possible through the avenue of gender performance. Ryan states that “The possible worlds of a character's domain are built out of truth-functional propositions; they are collections of facts which can be compared to the facts of the actual world” (111). This statement applies to

the TAW of the characters, where they come into conflict with statements like “women don’t talk like that” and compare them to the performances of gender by the women around them and judge accordingly. The statement can also apply to our own AW. When we notice the absurdity of the world Marina Carr has created in her work, perhaps we notice the discrepancies between the characters’ conceptions of correct gender performance and our own notions of gender presentation. As we watch the play we are forced to consider the fact that our ability to recognize examples of gender transgression in such a nonsensical play is indicative of our own societal conditioning regarding gender. Just as the role-playing scenes in this work both reinforce and subvert gender roles, our own recognition of these roles can be at once empowering and discouraging as we cope with the fact that we can recognize gender roles so far outside of their usual contexts.

Further, when we see that gender so integrally forms each of these types of TAPWs in the role-playing scenes, we can also see the ways in which gender in the AW functions as each of these types. We, too, experience gender as a *fantasy* or a *wish* for ourselves and others, or possibly an *obligation* in that aforementioned socially regulated framework, which all the while functions as a reaction to or a display of our *knowledge* in regards to gender performance. In this way, when we interact with gender roles 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 F-, W-, O-, and K-worlds in regards to gender performance, and we encounter the conflicts between these APWs as a result.

Still, the gender performances of *LitD* may look absurd in comparison to our own notions of gender. But differences in gender performance are not what makes *LitD* absurd to an audience in the AW, or at least it should not be. In fact, as I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, *LitD* and many other absurd pieces are difficult to formally classify as absurdism

at all. After all, when we think past some of the stranger aspects of the play, we might even recognize some elements of our own world within the text: spaces separated by sex, obligatory heterosexuality, and the absurdity of a strict gender binary itself. What we can gather from the work instead is that gender functions in the play much as it does in the AW, 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 private. Gender in this case becomes separate from how it is interpreted by the outside world, and we see this not in the manifestations of gender specific to Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark*, but rather in the fact that she posits gender as separate from the TAW and in the realm of the TAPW in accordance with Butler's notions of the distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (137). The meaning of the play lurks in the fact that Carr makes this distinction through absurdity, not in the mismatch between our own conceptions of gender performance and those of the play. In the words of the play itself, "it lurks in the saying, not what's being said" (Carr 59).

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