

Rewriting Hippolytus:
Hybridity, Posthumanism, and Social Politics in Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards**

Isabelle Torrance

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Abstract

*This article sheds light on Irish playwright Marina Carr's 2011 *Phaedra Backwards*, which premiered at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, as a particularly dense and multidirectional twenty-first century retelling of the Hippolytus myth. The centrality of the Minotaur in the drama, the role of technology in his creation, the place of nature in human life, and certain surprising motifs, such as the eating of daffodils, are examined through the lens of posthumanism to show how Carr's play invites reflection on nonconformism in society and on human damage to the natural world.*

In one of our honorand John Peradotto's most influential articles (2007 [1969]), a pillar of scholarship on Greek tragedy over the fifty years since its original publication, he unravels the meaning and overarching structural significance behind the extraordinarily dense metaphor of the eagles feasting on the pregnant hare in the opening choral ode (*parodos*) of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. Along with this analysis of the eagle and hare metaphor, Peradotto also draws attention to both the importance of the Brauronia (where girls imitated bears) for understanding Aeschylus's presentation of the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the symbolism of the lion cub in the third choral ode (second *stasimon*). This kind of literary equation between human behavior and animal behavior—and the ritual substitution of an animal for a human—may be viewed as an embryonic precursor to the more radical literary exploration of animal-human hybridity. Such imagery is frequently found in classical Greek literature and culture,¹ but Greek culture also looks beyond animal symbolism and substitutions [End Page 229] to actual animal-human hybridity as exemplified by creatures such as satyrs, the Sphinx, the Gorgons, the Sirens, Chiron (and other centaurs), the talking horse of Achilles, and the Minotaur (who will be central to our discussion here). Numerous tales exist as well of human metamorphosis into animal and plant forms. These recurring motifs have recently been examined in the context of animal-human interactions in antiquity and, more importantly, in relation to posthumanism.² In their introduction to a new collection of essays on classical literature and the posthuman, Giulia Maria Chesi and Francesca Spiegel (2020.4–10) propose that a posthumanist approach to classical literature can be understood within the emancipatory principles of humanism and the heterogeneous subject, where humanism is not negated but rather intensified through a posthumanist lens. Highlighting cases in which humanism has

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¹ For general overviews, see Alexandridis, Wild, and Winkler-Horaček 2008 and Campbell 2014. On the pervasiveness of animal imagery in classical Greek literature, see, e.g., Nünlist 1998.39–67; in early poetry, see Hawtree 2014 on epic, Thumiger 2014 on tragedy, and Corbel-Morana 2012 and Pütz 2014 on comedy. The comedies of Aristophanes regularly feature intelligent animals who get the better of dim-witted humans, as discussed by Miles 2017. For comprehensive coverage of the significance of animals in ancient Greek religion, see the collected essays in Kindt 2021.

² On animal-human interactions, see the collected essays in Fögen and Thomas 2017, with a significant bibliography compiled by Fögen (pp. 435–74).

championed emancipation (from the rigors of religious doctrine, for example, or from exclusion to education), Chesi and Spiegel further consider how classical thinkers including Aristotle and the Greek tragedians present the human subject *in relation to* other animals. The relational human subject of classical antiquity is heterogeneous, they argue, not only as it stands in relation to other animals but also in its capacity to embody aspects of other animals or entities as exemplified by human/animal hybrids ("humanimals") and human/technology hybrids ("huma(n)chines").

The conceptualization of posthumanism as both emancipatory and heterogenous intersects with Marina Carr's rewriting of the Hippolytus myth in her play *Phaedra Backwards* most emblematically through the figure of the Minotaur, who functions as the lynchpin for a broader thematic exploration of hybridity, monstrosity, and humanity. As an animal-human hybrid who was conceived by means of a technologically modified human (Pasiphae was concealed within the artificial cow constructed by Carr's Daedalus figure, simply called Inventor), Carr's Minotaur serves, at a very basic level, to underline the humanity of the monstrous and the monstrosity of humanity. I will also argue that the literal and implied hybridity of certain other characters reflects social and identity politics in our contemporary culture and provides a key thematic lens through which to view the significance of Carr's particularly complex *Phaedra Backwards*. [End Page 230]

THE MCCARTER THEATRE PRODUCTION

Phaedra Backwards premiered in 2011 at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J. in a production directed by Emily Mann and was published in the third volume of Marina Carr's plays in 2015. It is one of a number of reworkings of Greek tragedy by the Irish playwright, the best known of which is her 1998 adaptation of the Medea myth *By the Bog of Cats*, which has been revived in numerous international productions, including two featuring Academy Award winner Holly Hunter (San José Repertory Theatre, 2001; Wyndham's Theatre, London, 2004–05).³

As with all her mythologically inspired adaptations, Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* mines numerous sources, expands the psychological motivations of the mythological characters, and is especially dense in its use of literary allusions and symbolism. As such, it may be compared to Carr's *Ariel*, the 2002 remake of the *Oresteia* that audiences found difficult to follow in a single performance but which, I argue, is extremely rewarding on further examination (see Torrance 2018). In the case of *Phaedra Backwards*, significant efforts were made to provide guidance for those in the theatre.⁴ A twenty-minute pre-show talk on the "Inside Story" was offered before every performance, a series of symposia with cross-disciplinary experts was planned in conjunction with the play's run, and post-show discussions also formed part of the

³ For an overview of the international success of *By the Bog of Cats*, see Sihra 2018.117–19. Other adaptations of Greek tragedy by Carr include *Ariel* (2002, based on the *Oresteia* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*); *Hecuba* (2015, based on *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, and the *Iliad*); *iGirl* (2020, libretto for the electronic opera by Roger Doyle, Clonmel Arts Festival, containing arias inspired by the Theban tragedies); *Girl on an Altar* (2021, based on *Iphigenia at Aulis* and given a streamed staged reading at the Kiln Theatre, London); and *The Boy* (its premiere at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 2020 was postponed due to the Covid pandemic; it is based on the Theban tragedies).

⁴ I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of the staff of the McCarter Theatre in accessing materials related to the *Phaedra Backwards* production.

outreach. Information on these events was provided in a thirty-one page programme (more of an "information pack").⁵ [End Page 231]

MYTHOLOGY "BACKWARDS"

Clearly, the McCarter Theatre provided such detailed materials because the play is very challenging for anyone without a strong grasp of the mythology against which Carr is working. The myth is "backwards," as the title reveals, so in order to truly understand how the plot has been reversed and what effect this has, some knowledge is required of the original mythical landscape. A brief summary of the tragic elements on which Carr draws will be useful here also. Her main source is Euripides' *Hippolytus*, with elements taken from Seneca's *Phaedra* and Racine's *Phèdre*. In the classical myth, Theseus, king of Athens, has an adult son Hippolytus (from Theseus's liaison with an Amazon in his youth) who lives at the palace with Theseus's current wife Phaedra and their young children. Hippolytus is devoted to Artemis, goddess of hunting and nature, and entirely rejects Aphrodite and sexuality. As punishment, Aphrodite curses Phaedra with an intense lust for her stepson. Hippolytus discovers Phaedra's desire for him and is horrified, and Phaedra, in an attempt to preserve her honor, accuses him of rape and then commits suicide. Theseus, believing Phaedra's accusation, calls down the curses of his grandfather Poseidon on Hippolytus, who dies trampled by his horses when a terrifying bull emerges from the sea. Theseus discovers too late that Hippolytus was innocent of the charge. Racine adds a romantic interest for Hippolytus in the figure of Aricie, an Athenian princess, whom Carr develops into Hippolytus's girlfriend Aricia.

Carr's Hippolytus, then, does not reject sexuality. Far from being the celibate young man of antiquity, he has had more girlfriends than he can count. Phaedra says he is "made for the women and the dusk." "How many have drunk at your well?" she asks, to which he responds dryly: "I'm not a mathematician" (Carr 2015.87). In this version, it is Hippolytus who desperately desires Phaedra and she who rejects him. The central plot element is thus entirely reversed. Similarly, relations between Hippolytus and Aricia are not those of Racine. There Aricie is the one true love of Hippolytus whom he has promised to marry, but Carr's Hippolytus cruelly rejects the thought of any commitment to Aricia: "I look at you and all I see are weddings, christenings, funerals, one endless ritual in white. I'll pass" (Carr 2015.120). Carr also begins at the end: her opening scene [End Page 232] presents Theseus and Phaedra discussing the death of Hippolytus, which is the drama's tragic conclusion, before moving backwards in time to unravel how the characters had come to this point.

Not quite everything is backwards in Carr's play, however, which adds to its complexity, as certain crucial plot elements are retained from the traditional myth. Carr's Hippolytus hates women, much like his original counterpart who is responsible for one of the most misogynist rants in classical poetry (*Hipp.* 616–68). When Aricia complains that Phaedra has been "eyeballing" her and says that Phaedra "hates women," Hippolytus replies: "Who doesn't?"

⁵ This programme also included: a summary of the tragic myth of Phaedra; a plot summary of *Phaedra Backwards* with accompanying character descriptions; an illustrated mythological family tree; an interview with Marina Carr about her inspiration and influences in writing the play; a brief analysis of the tragedy by Emily Mann; a list of significant plants referenced in the drama with explanations of their symbolism; a summary of some of the most influential treatments of the Phaedra myth to date (Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Seneca's *Phaedra*, Racine's *Phèdre*, Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood's *Some Velvet Morning*, and Charles Mee's *True Love*); detailed guidance for pre-show and post-show suggested questions, discussion points, and activities.

(Carr 2015.86). He evidently does not care a jot for his girlfriend, who is made to witness his flirtations with Phaedra before she is rejected outright.

In other ways, however, Hippolytus is cast against his prototype. Through his conversations with Aricia it becomes clear that he has no interest in nature whatsoever, unlike the Hippolytus of Euripides and Seneca who is entirely dedicated to Artemis and to a life in harmony with the natural world. In *Phaedra Backwards*, Hippolytus sneers at Aricia's attempts to draw his attention to the beauty of the surrounding landscape ("What are you, the tourist board?"), he is "Sick looking at" the "beautiful bay," the mountains are "just mountains," and "Only fools describe water" (Carr 2015.85). Aricia later admits that she has "always hated trees" and plans to "run a concrete empire" where "there will not be a tree for a thousand miles."⁶ Proclaiming that "technology is marvellous," Aricia rejects nature in favor of human craft (Carr 2015.92). Phaedra, on the other hand, is the character most associated with the natural world. Only the trees keep her where she is, she claims (Carr 2015.91).

Theseus accepts Phaedra's insinuation, as in the original, that his son has had relations with her and banishes him from the house into the night. Hippolytus ends up dead on the rocks after falling over a cliff into the sea a short distance away—his death caused by the Minotaur rather than an unspecified bull (Carr 2015.121–22).⁷ In broad outline, then, Phaedra causes the death of Hippolytus in a manner analogous to the classical [End Page 233] tradition. But her motivation is entirely different. While Phaedra is no prude—she claims to have had thirteen sexual partners, with Theseus the fourteenth—she has no desire for Hippolytus and is not trying to save her reputation; nor does she commit suicide because of him (Carr 2015.87). Rather, she is pressured by her brother the Minotaur, a revenant from the grave, to create an opportunity for him to be avenged for his death at Theseus's hands. This vengeance will manifest itself in the Minotaur's killing of Hippolytus.

Carr's *Phaedra Backwards* is notable for its focus on the Cretan aspects of the myth. As noted by Sophie Mills in her discussion of the reception of *Hippolytus*, Kenneth Rexroth's 1951 *Phaedra* is unusual in highlighting "Cretan exoticism," which is "only embryonic in Euripides but already more noticeable in Seneca" (Mills 2002.120). Overall, however, the numerous adaptations of the Hippolytus tragedy have avoided deep engagement with the more radical elements of the Cretan myth, and Carr's play is remarkable for placing the Minotaur centre stage.⁸ Phaedra's dead parents, Pasiphae and Minos, along with her dead sister Ariadne, also appear and join the Minotaur in pressuring Phaedra to do their bidding; this culminates in a bloody animalistic attack on Phaedra at the end of scene 8. When Theseus later queries her injuries, Phaedra implies she has been roughly handled by Hippolytus. Carr thus also goes backwards in mythological time by expanding significantly the earlier events in the lives of Phaedra and Theseus and showing their lasting psychological impact.⁹

⁶ Carr's Agamemnon in *Ariel*, Fermoy Fitzgerald, is also negatively associated with the cement and building business with which he makes his fortune—but only after making a pact with the ruthless God of the Old Testament and murdering his daughter, until, eventually, he is killed by his devastated wife.

⁷ Carr may have been influenced by Seneca here, who makes the bull explicitly Cretan in his *Phaedra* (1170–73).

⁸ For overviews of the reception history of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, see Mills 2002.109–29 and Lauriola 2015.

⁹ Marina Carr often creates profound psychological histories for her reworked mythological characters. In *By the Bog of Cats*, Carr's Medea figure, Hester Swane, for instance, suffers from deep-rooted childhood abandonment trauma, plus discrimination as an unmarried mother and member of the Irish Traveller community. In *Ariel*, the Clytemnestra, Frances Fitzgerald, is traumatized by the death of her

BULLS AND HYBRIDS

The past in *Phaedra Backwards* includes Pasiphae and Minos. They are a couple destroyed by grief when their three-year-old son is accidentally trampled to death by the white bull that Minos had captured (Carr 2015.100). After that death, Minos abandons Crete, leaving Pasiphae alone to bury [End Page 234] and mourn their child. In Minos's absence, Pasiphae conceives a passion for the white bull, forces the Inventor to create an artificial cow in which she can hide to mate with the bull, and conceives a child: the Minotaur. When Minos returns after years away and is outraged and disgusted by the sight of the Minotaur, Pasiphae protects and defends him; she claims that he is a miracle: "This is our dead son reborn from the white bull who took him. You're looking at the impossible. He is yours and mine. Hold him. Please. Make him possible" (Carr 2015.100). The story about the death of a young child is essentially an invention, although it features some elements of a classical myth concerning one of the sons of Minos and Pasiphae, Glaucus, who got lost as an infant, crawled into a honeypot and died there, but was subsequently found and resurrected by the gifted seer Polyidos. This was the subject of lost tragedies by each of the major tragedians: Aeschylus's *Cretan Women*, Sophocles' *Seers*, and Euripides' *Polyidos*, and is a story related by the mythographers Hyginus (*Fab.* 136) and Apollodorus (3.3.17–20).

Pasiphae's mating with the bull by hiding in a constructed cow is taken directly from classical mythology and is the focus of the second scene in Carr's play where we see the unveiling of the cow. In the McCarter production, this was a voyeuristic scene involving a wire-frame cow (so completely transparent) into which the actress climbs wearing only nude-coloured undergarments. She then briefly simulates having sex with the bull as the Inventor puts his arm into the back end of the cow to make sure that she is positioned correctly. Aside from the humour and titillation, the artificial cow underlines the role of technology in generating an animal-human hybrid. Pasiphae mating with the bull, moreover, arguably contains the deeper element of mysticism which is a trademark of Carr's plays. These often draw on Irish folk belief which, as Melissa Sihra observes, "is characterised by the presence of a metaphysical realm that is equal if not more powerful than the everyday world."¹⁰ In this case, the metaphysical relates to the death of Pasiphae's child and a desire for his resurrection. It is well-known in Carr's native Ireland that the muse of the famous Irish poet W. B. Yeats, the Irish political revolutionary Maud Gonne, attempted to reincarnate her dead infant son by having intercourse with his father by his grave (O'Callaghan and Nic Dháibhéid 2009).¹¹ Bizarre as it may seem, [End Page 235] the Maud Gonne analogue provides an important psychological explanation for Pasiphae's behaviour in turning to the agent of her son's death in an attempt to resurrect him. The figure of the Minotaur, however, allows Carr to move beyond mysticism and onto issues of hybridity.

Although Carr's Minos rejects Pasiphae as "insane," a "bull-fancier," "monster-maker," and the child Minotaur as an "ox-faced mutant," an "evil growth from some horrific urn" (Carr 2015.100), Phaedra claims that we humans are all essentially animal hybrids. "You see the anthropologists have been looking so long for this missing link, the great silence that happened between the baboon and homo sapiens. There's no missing link. We are the missing link. We

first son from a previous marriage. In *Hecuba*, Carr is unflinching in presenting the impact of the gruesome murders of Hecuba's husband and children.

¹⁰ Sihra 2018.26. Carr herself, as quoted at Sihra 2018.26, speaks of the "precedence of the metaphysical world over the physical."

¹¹ As Carr herself notes (2007.x), Maud Gonne is also one of the few female figures widely recognized for her contributions to Irish theatre.

lay down with the gorillas or our not so distant ancestors did and—*voilà!* Here we are, half-breeds with the wild undertow of the jungle, reptile, Doberman, shark. We got it all. We got the whole swill in spades" (Carr 2015.87). Carr's play insists that all humans are animals, or "humanimals" in the language of posthumanism. A passing reference to a local "German butcher" who "goes purple in the face" when he tears a dolphin apart (Carr 2015.108–09) is shocking in the savagery it suggests. The butchering of an animal not normally eaten by humans, and known to be capable of forming strong bonds with them, underlines the violence of the act. Theseus and all other humans are presented as animals. When Theseus calls the Minotaur an animal, Phaedra retorts: "And you're not an animal? And I'm not? And are we not surrounded by animals? You call the way we live human? This country human? The passions of upright two-footers human? We're animals" (Carr 2015.123). Phaedra blithely references the time when humans "crossbred with the sharks," claiming it diluted our sleep (Carr 2015.93), and the issue of human-animal hybridity is amplified through metaphor. Phaedra calls life a "gallop" (Carr 2015.119) and Theseus "an aging bull past his prime" (Carr 2015.106), while Theseus is disappointed in Hippolytus because he does not see "some shadow of the young bull" in him (Carr 2015.122).

If the Minotaur is predatory and violent, moreover, this is only because of his rejection by society. Labelled an aberration, he is forcibly removed from the care of his loving mother (Carr 2015.114–15), even though he is "sick with terror" about his way of life (Carr 2015.113). As such, the Minotaur represents the trauma of needlessly ostracizing non-conforming members of society, while the play asks a bigger question about who the monsters really are. As Ireland and other countries, such as Canada and Australia, increasingly come to reflect on the shameful and brutal past policies of separating "illegitimate" or indigenous children from their parents [End Page 236] that led to hundreds or thousands of infant deaths over the decades, Carr's representation of the Minotaur's experience is significant.¹²

The Minotaur grows up to trap and kill "hares, dogs, sows, foals, lambs," and "women." These women, he claims, were "willing ... until they saw where their will had led them" (Carr 2015.115). Theseus is his counterpart in violence as "the only one who could bring a bull to its knees" (Carr 2015.116). In the speech mentioned above where Theseus voices his

¹² Throughout the twentieth century, unmarried mothers in Ireland who did not have family support were systematically sent to state- and church-run homes where they worked as the equivalent of slaves and where their infants were taken from them regardless of their wishes, often for human trafficking through covert adoptions. Thousands of infants died from neglect and were buried unceremoniously in mass graves; see, e.g., Hogan 2020. There is now growing awareness of abuses against indigenous children in other countries, including Australia and Canada, where they were systematically targeted for "integration," taken from their families, and placed in schools where they were frequently abused and neglected leading to many deaths and burials in mass graves. See the vast quantity of references gathered in the Wikipedia articles on Australia's "Stolen Generations": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stolen_Generations and on Canada's notorious residential schools: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Indian_residential_school_gravesites

Carr's plays are known for confronting taboo issues, such as incest and abuse, as well as the systemic cultural traumas of Irish society. Harris 2003 discusses Carr's early works in this context. More recently, Carr's libretto for Roger Doyle's 2020 opera *iGirl* references abuse and child abandonment through the Oedipus myth. A double CD and digital album of the opera were released by Doyle in 2021 and are available on Doyle's website where individual tracks appear alongside Carr's printed text at <https://rogerdoyle1.bandcamp.com/album/igirl-act-one> and <https://rogerdoyle1.bandcamp.com/album/igirl-act-two>

disappointment with Hippolytus, he also boasts that he, by the age of twenty, had already wrestled a bull to the ground (Carr 2015.121–22). Women desire the Minotaur and the bull, we are told (Carr 2015.101, 115), and Pasiphae is evidence of that.¹³ But Theseus is also a serial seducer of women. He characterizes women as his "obsession," claims to have slept with, and kept a record of, 3,011 women, each of whom he can remember, and imagines that all women find him enchanting (Carr 2015.102–03). The speech begins: "A woman wrote a story about me once. 'Dining with the Enchanter' she called it. And yes I was. I am. I deserve that title" (Carr 2015.102). In a literary allusion typical of Carr's plays, this references *The Enchanter*, a novella by Vladimir Nabokov.¹⁴ Written in 1939 but first published posthumously in [End Page 237] 1986, Nabokov's work tells the tale of a middle-aged man who is infatuated with a young girl whose mother is sick. He marries the mother, who subsequently dies, and he becomes consumed with conflicted feelings which vacillate between rationalizing his lust for the girl and being horrified by it. The opening sentence of the novella reads: "How can I come to terms with myself?" and at a climactic moment, the man, overcome by his own monstrosity, runs out into the street and is killed by a car.

If Theseus thinks he deserves the title "the Enchanter," then he is not only mistaken in linguistic terms (his speech is far from enchanting), he is also seriously mistaken in metaliterary terms, since he lacks any critical awareness of his own shortcomings, misdeeds, or monstrosity—unlike Nabokov's protagonist and unlike the Minotaur in Carr's play. Like Nabokov's protagonist, however, Theseus had taken a lover who died (Ariadne) and conceived a desire for her family member, in this case her sister Phaedra. Carr has the relationship between Theseus and Phaedra develop at Ariadne's funeral, continuing the thematic nexus of death and desire. In a further detail, which seems to seal the allusion to Nabokov (a passionate student of moths and butterflies), Theseus announces his intention to kill the moth that his daughter has reported in her bedroom (Carr 2015.88). By killing the moth, Theseus repeats his aggression against the natural world, represented by his murder of the Minotaur, and casts himself as nature's antagonist.

NATURE, HYBRIDITY, AND POSTHUMANISM: EATING DAFFODILS AND MOVING BEYOND AIR

The Minotaur, Pasiphae, Minos, and Ariadne all appear on stage as revenants from the grave, while Phaedra follows them into the world of the dead at the drama's conclusion. But in the striking final words of the play, the Minotaur says to Phaedra: "Come, I owe you a daffodil feast." She responds: "The time [End Page 238] for eating daffodils is past. The distance travelled from myself is too great. I'll go on my own steam. I won't be long" (Carr 2015.125).

¹³ The association between the bull and female sexuality in the Cretan myths can be traced back to Europa's abduction by Zeus in the form of a bull, as discussed by Ziolkowski 2008.27–66.

¹⁴ In addition to Greek playwrights, Carr frequently reworks Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, and the Bible in her plays; see Torrance 2018. Other examples in *Phaedra Backwards* include Phaedra's casual allusion to Psalm 137 during the exchange about aspens: "There on the willow trees we hung up our harps" (Carr 2015.91), when the Israelites refuse to play music for their captors. The intertext ties together the imagery of trees, here associated with resistance, with other themes pertinent to the play: memories of the past and revenge achieved by dashing children against rocks. Another notable reference is the Nurse's muttering: "*a Sappho poem about infantry and oars*" (Carr 2015.107), an evocation of Sappho frag. 16, famously translated by Mary Barnard with the title "To Any Army Wife, in Sardis." This line might also be a reminder of an earlier Irish reworking of the Phaedra story by Brian Friel, in whose 1977 play, *Living Quarters: After Hippolytus*, the Theseus figure, Frank Butler, is an Irish army commander and the setting, like Carr's, is a remote seaside.

Phaedra and the Minotaur exit together into the sea (which is projected on a screen): Phaedra embracing death through suicide and the Minotaur returning to the realm of the dead. Like other bodies of water in Carr's plays, the sea in *Phaedra Backwards* is related to female agency, here Phaedra's.¹⁵ It is through her agency that Hippolytus ends up dying in the sea, and it is her decision to walk into the sea at the end of the play. The eating of daffodils befuddled *New York Times* reviewer Anita Gates (2011), who notes "an odd line near the end: 'The time for eating daffodils is past.'" But the daffodil imagery has clear narrative, structural, and thematic functions in linking past and present, death and life, and animal and human at key points in the play. Daffodils allow access to the underworld, since the daffodil (narcissus in classical sources) is the beguiling flower that leads directly to Persephone's descent into Hades in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.¹⁶ Phaedra and her family also cross the boundary between death and life.

What is more, the opening image of Carr's play, also shown on a screen, is a field of daffodils accompanied by the sound of the sea. In the field play three children: Child Phaedra, Child Ariadne, and Child Minotaur. Child Minotaur hands daffodils to the girls and all three eat them. The stage directions continue: "*In her own world [adult] Phaedra raises a hand to take the daffodil*" (Carr 2015.77). Phaedra references this opening scene when she tells Theseus that she ate daffodils the day before, as she had when she was a child—she and her siblings "in the sea field eating daffodils, grazing like cows" (Carr 2015.103). The act of eating daffodils casts Phaedra's family as hybrid beings: if they graze on flowers like animals do, they are somewhere between human and animal. When the adult Minotaur offers Phaedra daffodils, they would be the reward for helping him avenge himself on his murderer Theseus (Carr 2015.108). The daffodil motif thus punctuates the structure of the play, framing the opening and closing scenes and appearing at its midpoint. **[End Page 239]**

Phaedra should have been an aspen tree, we are told by Aricia, and Phaedra is talented at growing aspens (Carr 2015.91), in a further connection between Phaedra and the natural world. The notion of being or becoming a tree in a classical context naturally evokes Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an obvious text for posthumanist reflection, where heroines such as Daphne, Myrrha, and the Heliades are turned into trees.¹⁷ As a metaphor for Phaedra, the image stresses both her deep connection with nature and her entrapment in her current situation. Aspens are known for their intricate root systems and asexual reproductive capacities such that all aspens in any one forest may be interconnected through those roots as a colony derived from a single original parent seedling. This is a fitting metaphor for Phaedra's deep connection with her family roots in the underworld and their reappearance in her world. It also reflects her lack of sexual desire for Hippolytus.

The reference to trees in this scene leads to further discussion of plant-human hybridity when Theseus recounts the tale of a man he once met who had an oak tree growing out of his palm. It was only after the tree appeared on his hand that the man started to live (Carr 2015.91), and

¹⁵ Cf. Sihra 2018.12: "Bodies of water occur with frequency in Carr's plays and offer alternative, often unresolved, symbolic depths of expression for the central women beyond the confines of the home." The marshy bog is also a mystical and significant space as the home of Hester Swane in *By the Bog of Cats*, on which see Lojek 2011.65–96.

¹⁶ The Homeric hymns and Ovid are listed as sources for the connection between daffodils and Hades in the programme for the McCarter production of *Phaedra Backwards*. On the negotiation between past and present in Carr's plays, see Trench 2010.

¹⁷ For an insightful posthumanist reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Sissa 2019, who argues for an anthropocentric understanding of this text that is paradoxically also posthuman.

he requested burial with his palm facing up so that the tree could live on (Carr 2015.92). The connection between trees and life, so stark in the tale of the oak growing out of a human hand, is challenged by Aricia, who aims to move the world "beyond air." She posits a future where an aspen might only be found in a remote "Eastern European museum, an illegal exhibit in the freak section," and where people will marvel at trees as "monsters" from antiquity (Carr 2015.92). Carr thus weaves together various perspectives on human interdependence with the natural world which engage with the pressing contemporary issue of balancing the detrimental ecological impact of economic prosperity (Aricia has a degree in economics) with the desperate need to preserve nature in the face of climate change.

HYBRIDITY AND SOCIAL POLITICS: CONCLUSIONS

In moving the Phaedra story into the modern world, Carr's Phaedra offers a pointed comment about responsibility: "A few thousand years ago we could blame Aphrodite," she says, or, more recently, "any of those mad [End Page 240] medieval saints." She gives the example of whipping a statue of St. Martin de Porres if he refuses to find what one had lost: "Now I have to take the blame for everything myself"; "That's the thing I really cannot abide about being modern" (Carr 2015.88–89). The reference to St. Martin de Porres is deliberately misleading and thematically significant. It is an Irish commonplace to say a prayer to St. Anthony if one wishes to find something: a parking space, a lost wallet or phone, because St. Anthony is the patron saint of lost things. St. Martin de Porres, on the other hand, for those who know or those who care to find out, is the patron saint of mixed races and of racial harmony. Reputed also to have been able to communicate with animals, Martin de Porres is a symbol of societal empathy, inclusion, and contact with the natural world. Marina Carr's *Phaedra Backwards*, then, in all its complexity, urges us to embrace our own innate hybridities. The natural, animal world in her reading is the aspirational half of hybrid entities, it is not the human half. In the Minotaur's formulation of himself, he has "All the nobility of the white bull. But unfortunately too in my mix, the shadowy faculty of your race"—that is, the human race (Carr 2015.101).

In challenging posthumanism's current prioritization of science as a solution, Miriam Leonard observes (2019.91–92) that Greek tragedy "rejects the either/or logic of modernity and positions its human protagonists on a spectrum of sub- and supra-human possibility" with a "focus on the interconnectedness of these states of being"; moreover, tragedy "can show us how we have never been human." This analysis chimes with Carr's presentation of a spectrum of hybridities in *Phaedra Backwards*, where the Minotaur is a binary, half-and-half hybrid, while Phaedra aspires to hybridity by eating daffodils, imagining herself as an aspen, and emphasizing the innate hybridity of the human race. Theseus is tone-deaf to the importance of the natural world and loses his son as a direct result of his killing of the Minotaur. Hippolytus and Aricia also reject nature, and while Hippolytus's death arises from his father's actions, he is shown to be his father's son with his lack of respect for women—albeit without the same violent tendencies. Aricia, too, actively anticipates a posthuman world where trees and air will be unnecessary for human survival. Her severance from the natural world makes her an unusual female character in Carr's work and also diametrically opposed to Phaedra. But this is Phaedra's play, and it is Phaedra who validates the Minotaur and all he represents.

As a hybrid and a central presence throughout the play, the Minotaur provides a key to its broader engagements with hybridity and posthumanism. Carr's portrayal of the Minotaur as a traumatized social [End Page 241] outcast whose acceptance by society might have led to different outcomes anticipates Chesi and Spiegel's proposition (2020.19) of an "emancipatory policy" of posthumanism, in which "the discriminating factors between humans, animals and

robotic devices" are abandoned, thus challenging "a tradition of thinking in which some people are routinely denied their human status and rights, and are ignored or marginalized." For earlier authors and artists, too, the Minotaur symbolized alienation as someone subject to a hostile social politics in a pattern traced by Theodore Ziolkowski.¹⁸ Prominent among those influenced by this figure of the Minotaur is Pablo Picasso, whose drawings of the Minotaur Carr's character is said to resemble (Carr 2015.84).

The potential for a posthumanist reading of the Minotaur myth is evident already in Euripides' poorly preserved tragedy *Cretans*, where, as Johan Tralau has recently discussed (2020.201), metaphor is used disruptively in the fragments to "mirror the distortions incarnated in the machine that unites bull and human being, as well as in the monstrous body that is bull and man." In *Phaedra Backwards*, Marina Carr explores the "humanimal" in the Minotaur, the "huma(n)chine" in his creation, and a scale of hybridities from metaphorical to enacted. These varied hybridities enable and invite reflections on posthumanist concerns, on the definition and place of nonconformists in society, and on the devastating human impact on the natural world.

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¹⁸ Ziolkowski 2008.67–116; on the reception of the Minotaur myth in popular culture, see also Gloyn 2020.169–93.

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