"We Must Continue to Make a Show of Ourselves"

Queer Mythologies in the Oeuvre of Phillip McMahon

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Summary

This thesis explores the construction of queer mythologies, and their effect on queer community formation, through the oeuvre of Irish playwright Phillip McMahon. It analyses the use of queer myths of people and queer myths of place in *I Am Tonie Walsh* (2018), *Come On Home* (2018), and *Once Before I Go* (2021).

Queerness is intrinsically connected to non-normativity, and denotes a playful, fluid resistance to social norms. As a result, queerness occupies a precarious position, vulnerable to societal scrutiny, but is also a fruitful political tool when pushing for progressive change. It enables fluid thinking about alternative ways of considering normality. Queer narratives, as a result, have the power to encourage listeners or readers to allow themselves to think differently, and accept that which is strange and different. Especially performed narratives are a powerful medium in that sense. This thesis mainly uses Shonagh Hill's theory of embodied female mythology, which claims that the power of performance stems from its ability to physically embody narratives, claim autonomy over them, and thus reframe mythologies which centralise regressive ideologies and norms. This idea is taken from its theoretical context and applied to queer studies and queer performance. The idea of queer mythologies is approached in two separate directions: queer myths of people, focusing on ideas of sainthood and herodom and the construction of queer icons; and queer myths of place, focusing on queer safe spaces, the rural-urban divide, and legacy sites.

These theoretical concepts are applied to Phillip McMahon's aforementioned plays. *I Am Tonie Walsh* is a documentary play which McMahon wrote with Tonie Walsh himself. Walsh is considered Ireland's "Godfather of Gay" and occupies an important position within the Irish queer scene. This thesis shows the play is constructed like a traditional hero journey, making this play an active narrative process of myth-making which canonically includes Walsh in the pantheon of Irish queer heroes and icons. In *Come On Home,* the idea of queer herodom is problematised by showcasing the toxic influence of power abuse and its influence on vulnerable, marginalised groups. This thesis also analyses the mythologised rural-to-urban migration in this play. That same migration is also featured in *Once Before I Go,* where the constant movement of the main characters underlines the fluidity of queer myths of place, and how these 'place-myths' shift depending on the community's needs. This thesis additionally explores the construction of a queer hero on a small scale within a local community in *Once Before I Go,* connecting self-mythification to narrative autonomy and resisting external pressure to conform to a normative idea of herodom and martyrdom.

The construction of queer mythologies in McMahon's plays underlines the importance of the existence of a mythological framework to serve as a stable basis for queer identity formation. Such a queer mythological context serves as a referential frame for queer individuals when they are looking to make sense of their own identity and place within their community. As a result, queer mythologies are shown to be vital not just for the formation of queer communities, but for their continued existence.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Ireland and Queerness

In its most literal, and also in its most old-fashioned definition, the word *queer* means "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric".[1] In other words: to be queer is to be different. Anything that is queer deviates from social norms, and carries notions of unease and perhaps even apprehension. In contemporary uses, however, queerness as a concept, and *queer* as a reclaimed term, is more directly linked to the LGBTQ+ community. In his discussion of queer studies in Ireland, Ed Madden notes that "the term *queer* functions in popular discourse as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ identities, though in queer studies it also functions as a placeholder for a flexible resistance to cultural and social norms".[2] In that sense, this resistance does play into the counternormative connotations of the older definition of queerness, weaponizing that perceived strangeness to question what makes something strange or normal in the first place. As Fintan Walsh states, "queerness undermines presumptions of stability and certainty, and at its boldest aspires to alternative ways of being, doing, feeling and knowing".[3] Queerness, then, aims to be a powerful tool in inciting change and new, progressive ways of thinking, simply by signifying something that is overtly different from what is socially accepted and deemed normal.

In an Irish context, queerness and politics are conjoined as they are globally, both now and historically. The idea of queerness as a driving factor for progressive political change coincides with the ethos of feminist, gay and lesbian political movements in Ireland's late seventies. The performances which emerged from and exemplified these movements often featured autobiographical stories, linking broad political contexts to personal, intimate, and relatable experiences, since for example lesbian lives were in the time's particular social context deemed to be inherently political.[4] The lived experience of lesbianism was in many ways considered a political act. In other words, like queerness, the feminist, gay and lesbian

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[1] The Oxford English Dictionary website, "Queer," accessed September 27th, 2022. https://www-oed-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/156236?rskey=mD22rS&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid

[2] Ed Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies,* edited by Renée Fox Mike Cronin, and Brian Ó Conchubhair, (Oxon: Routledge, 2021) 245.

[3] Fintan Walsh, "Introduction," in *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016): 2.

[4] Paul Halferty, "Performing Politics: Queer Theatre in Ireland, 1968-2017," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance,* edited by Eamonn Jordan and Eric Weitz (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018): 185.

political movements of the seventies dictated that the personal, most notably for queer lives, is always political.[5] Despite this seemingly hopeful political potential, however, queerness's inherent public politics does place queer-identifying individuals in a vulnerable position, leaving them much more exposed to societal scrutiny, as underlined by Ireland's uneasy history with queerness in all its forms.

Queerness and queer studies in Ireland can be traced back quite far, yet really gained traction with the emergence of gay political activism. Although queerness, as Madden observes, has surpassed its connection to the LGBTQ+ community to signify a more broader deviation from societal norms, queer issues find their roots in issues of sex and sexuality. J. Paul Halferty observes that such issues began to be addressed more openly in Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the fundamental work of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement created a political space for the formation of the first Irish gay rights organisations.[6] This momentum led to LGBTQ+ issues being discussed more openly, both in politics and cultural expressions.[7] Though influences from both the Irish state and institutionalised religion undercut emancipatory processes, such as the decriminalisation of queer love, for a number of decades, Halferty notes that especially from the 1990s onwards with the rise of the "Celtic Tiger", the social and political situation in Ireland shifted to such an extent that a brighter future for the LGBTQ+ community appeared likely.[8]

Indeed, with milestones such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, and the legalisation of gay marriage in 2015, queerness may seem less of a controversial issue in contemporary Ireland. Yet Ed Madden pertinently warns against such an overgeneralisation:

> […] it is tempting to say that Ireland has become very queer, if by queer we simply mean the nation has become visibly, legally, and nominally hospitable to LGBTQ+ people. Such a narrative, however, convincing though it may be, fails to acknowledge voices and communities left out of that story […]. Such a narrative, that is, fails to address what might still be really queer about queer.[9]

In other words: queerness in Ireland is not an issue that should be or has been solved, but remains an important political intersection which enables critical thought about marginalised identities and alternative ways of being and thinking. Claiming a generally accepted

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[5] Halferty, "Performing Politics," 185.
[6] Halferty, "Performing Politics," 184.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Halferty, "Performing Politics," 188.
[9] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 247.

normalisation of queer identities not only runs the risk of erasing what makes the queer community unique by portraying them like a socially accepted and homogeneous group, but also hinders the political activism inherent to queer identities. This would curtail what Joseph A. Boone calls "the destabilization of any givens inherent in the very concept of queerness",[10] which according to Madden may inspire similar forms of social resistance.[11] Normalising queerness paradoxically counteracts this political potential: if queerness objects to the concept of normativity by nature, then normalising queerness and queer identities may significantly undermine queerness's unique and political qualities. Queerness, then, in Ireland and everywhere else, has not yet 'settled' securely, has not taken a single form, and perhaps never should.

1.2 Queer Performance

The queer community in Ireland has, however, not only used direct political action to navigate issues of queerness and counternormativity. In fact, queer *performance* has proved to be, according to Fintan Walsh, an "instrumental" medium, through which queer individuals can not only voice their perspective within "normative society", but also find each other and strengthen their sense of community.[12] Walsh observes how LGBTQ+ people "often have to willingly find each other, and actively construct their own social worlds, having no ready-made map to follow or reproduce".[13] Indeed, society still (sub)consciously centralises conventional ideas of what relationships and gender identities should look like, and consequently tends to enable individual and shared lives that are cisgender, able-bodied, heteronormative, and white. In this social context, queer individuals often have to create their own community spaces where they can feel safe and understood. Theatre and performance has proven to be a suitable space to do exactly that. In Ireland, according to Halferty, from roughly the 1960s to the present, "theatrical performance has been deployed to interrogate and challenge sexual repression of all kinds, to negotiate sexual and gender politics, and to foster a shared and continuing sense of identity and community".[14] Irish theatre and Irish performance, in other words, may be deployed to bring together what would have otherwise been left scattered and divided.

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[10] Joseph A. Boone, "Go West: An Introduction," in *Queer Frontiers*, edited by Joseph A. Boone et al., (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000): 3.
[11] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 247.
[12] Walsh, "Introduction," 3.
[13] Walsh, "Introduction," 15.
[14] Halferty, "Performing Politics" 181.

Although initial queer representations on the Irish stage were largely written by heterosexual playwrights who tended to use queer characters as allegorical, symbolic tools to engage with broader questions of repression and injustice in Irish society, over time, queer theatre by queer individuals became more common and was used to "raise consciousness, foster communities, reclaim history, and expand both current and historical conceptions of Irishness".[15] The founding of Ireland's first gay theatre company in the 1990s, Muted Cupid, set the stage for more queer theatre organisations to emerge, such as TheatreofplucK since the mid-2000s, and THISISPOPBABY in 2007, and the creation of the Dublin International Gay Theatre Festival in 2004. Queer theatre has become an indispensable influence in fostering emancipation. Cormac O'Brien notes that, in fact, queer theatre's roots are deeply intertwined with social justice campaigns: queer theatre practices were instrumental in advocating the Yes Equality campaign in 2015, which called for marriage equality in Ireland.[16] Tracing that momentum to the present, O'Brien additionally observes how, "resonating with Yes Equality, in its efforts to challenge shame, queer theatre in Ireland is currently characterised by non-traditional dramaturgical strategies that have disrupted the boundaries of narrative dramatic realism, a genre deeply entrenched in Irish theatrical culture".[17] It seems, then, that queerness also embodies counternormative qualities within Irish theatre, consciously pushing against conventional boundaries both in content and dramaturgy. As Ed Madden summarises, then: "queerness provokes questions".[18]

Within the infrastructure of queer theatre, theatre company THISISPOPBABY exemplifies the interaction of queerness and performance. According to Fintan Walsh, THISISPOPBABY "has gained a reputation for creating projects dedicated to both recuperating and evolving queer performance in Ireland".[19] The company carefully toes the precarious line between popular culture and countercultural movements, between mainstream and the margins,[20] navigating the previously discussed tension that arises when something queer is normalized, and what that might mean for the definition of queerness and its inherent political power. THISISPOPBABY has created shows for smaller venues, but has staged

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[15] Halferty, "Performing Politics," 182.
[16] Cormac O'Brien, "Queering the Irish Stage: Shame, Sexuality, and the Politics of Testimonial," in *Perspectives on Contemporary Irish Theatre,* edited by Anne Etienne and Thierry Dubost (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017): 251.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 255.
[19] Fintan Walsh, "Vertiginous Love, Loss and Belonging on the National Stage," in *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016): 120.
[20] Walsh, "Vertiginous Love," 121.

productions in the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre as well, creating consciously queer content that is both accessible and challenging to the status quo. Consequently, the company has been a central fixture of queer theatre in Ireland,[21] collaborating with and featuring a number of queer artists and performers, including queer rights activist and iconic Irish drag queen Panti Bliss.

Bliss was a significant figurehead aiding the marriage referendum campaign in Ireland, speaking openly about issues of homophobia and the importance of queer activism. For example, her performance after the curtain call of a 2014 production of James Plunkett's *The Risen People* at the Abbey went viral: Bliss gave a speech on homophobia and prejudice that Patrick Lonergan has called "a magnificent act of public performance".[22] It was not only a moment when a marginalised community managed to place themselves centre stage, but also an inevitable result of decennia of poignant interactions of Irish performance and social justice issues.[23] Panti Bliss's performance underlines this connection, especially in its societal effects. Emer O'Toole notes that Bliss exemplifies how "the intersection of the regulatory performativity of the marriage ceremony with the ambivalent ontology of drag opens up an imaginative space that undermines marriage as a heteronormative institution".[24] The performativity of her drag, and drag in general, then, underlines the pertinent interaction of queerness, performance, and political action that THISISPOPBABY is also known for.

1.3 Phillip McMahon, Queer Theatre, and Mythologies

THISISPOPBABY's co-director, Phillip McMahon, has been involved in the production of a number of distinctly queer theatre projects, both through THISISPOPBABY and independently. Some of his most recent plays include *I Am Tonie Walsh* (2018), *Come On Home* (2018), and *Once Before I Go* (2021), all of which address specifically queer subject matter. *I Am Tonie Walsh* is a documentary play which McMahon wrote in collaboration with Tonie Walsh himself, the "godfather of gay" and a "living legend"[25] in the Irish queer community, according to the THISISPOPBABY website. Walsh also performed the play, telling his own life story in while linking it to pivotal moments in Irish queer political history.

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[21] Walsh, "Vertiginous Love," 121.

[22] Patrick Lonergan, "Encountering Difference," in *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019): 162.

[23] Lonergan, "Encountering Difference," 163.

[24] Emer O'Toole, "Panti Bliss Still Can't Get Hitched: Meditations on Performativity, Drag, and Gay Marriage," *Sexualities* 22, No 3 (2019): 362. DOI: 10.1177/1363460717741809

[25] "*I Am Tonie Walsh*," THISISPOPBABY website, accessed September 23rd, 2022, https://thisispopbaby.com/shows/i-am-tonie-walsh/

Come On Home is a more traditionally structured play about a young man, Michael, who comes 'home' to the town where he grew up for his mother's funeral. There, he is forced to confront, as Mick Heaney, writing for *The Irish Times,* states, "the circumstances that prompted Michael to leave home for life in London as a gay man".[26] In 2021, McMahon wrote *Once Before I Go,* which, significantly, was featured as the Gate Theatre's headline production for 2021's Dublin Theatre Festival and which confronts the AIDS crisis in Ireland. Writing for *the Irish Independent,* Louise Bruton observes that *Once Before I Go* "allows the audience to open the door to queer history that was boarded up and padlocked for too long",[27] which emphasises that queer theatre and performance is not just a way to incite social action, but also a way for the queer community to remember histories which are often forgotten or erased.

Bruton's observation underlines Halferty's notion that "performances can be deployed to remember the past".[28] If, as Walsh noted, queer individuals often has to actively construct their own social spaces,[29] then (re)creating a shared historical point of reference may aid them in finding a sense of community. Yet this referential context does not limit itself to history: *mythologies* have also been observed to be instrumental in the construction of queer identities and communities. The history and context of the interaction of queerness and mythologies will be described more thoroughly in the following chapter, which details the theoretical framework and methodology, but it is important to observe already that mythologies serve as a central collective reference point as much as histories do. In the introduction to *Cassell's Encyclopaedia of Queer Myth, Symbol, and Spirit* (1997), Connor et al. note that there is power in the symbol-making processes associated with mythologies, claiming that "humans have sought to symbolize a perceived association of eroticism, gender identity, and the realm of sacred of mythic experience".[30] The mythological, then, seems to be a necessary element in the formation of both identities and communities.

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[26] Mick Heaney, "Come On Home: A Tale of Sexual Repression and Provincial Suffocation," in *The Irish Times,* July 18th, 2018. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/come-on-home-a-tale-of-sexual-repression-and-provincial-suffocation-1.3568894

[27] Louise Bruton, "Changing the Narrative: Phillip McMahon's *Once Before I Go* Charts the Struggle for Queer Equality in 1980s Ireland," in *The Irish Independent,* accessed september 30th, 2022. https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/theatre-arts/changing-the-narrative-phillip-mcmahons-once-before-i-go-charts-the-struggle-for-queer-equality-in-1980s-ireland-40919436.html

[28] Halferty, "Performing Politics," 194.

[29] Walsh, "Introduction," 15.

[30] Randy P. Connor, David Hatfield Sparks, Mariya Sparks, "Introduction," in *Cassell's Encyclopaedia of Queer Myth, Symbol, and Spirit* (London: Cassell, 1997): ix.

Connor et al. also observe how there seems to be a growing awareness of the lack of a shared mythological history in the queer community, and a sharper emphasis on the erasure of non-normative genders and sexualities from mythological texts.[31] The cultural and social presence of a common mythology, however, may serve to validate and contextualise contemporary queer presences, and aid queer individuals in search of their own identity. An effective way of constructing such mythologies is through theatre and performance. McMahon's plays *I Am Tonie Walsh* (2018), *Come On Home* (2018), and *Once Before I Go* (2021) all feature the concept of queer mythologies in a variety of forms: queer mythological figures, both on a broad socio-cultural scale and within a small, local community, and queer mythological places, such as queer safe spaces. But how, then, are queer mythologies constructed exactly in the oeuvre of Phillip McMahon?

Such queer mythologies can take various shapes that serve to support queer community and identity formation, as this thesis will demonstrate. There are, of course, queer mythological figures which the queer community can refer back to or relate to – think of the Greek deity Apollo, who was known to take both men and women as lovers. McMahon's documentary play *I Am Tonie Walsh* plays into this concept by centralising the near-mythological figure of Tonie Walsh and placing him firmly as a vital figure within Irish queer history. Places can also take on a mythological quality, serving as safe havens where queer individuals can expect to find a community which accepts them as they are. This is a fundamental theme in *Come On Home,* where the concept of 'home' and domestic safety and bliss is problematised by featuring the big city as a legendary safe space where any queer individual can finally find a better home, life, and family. Additionally, myths do not necessarily have to be metropolitan; they can serve as communal reference points within small communities, such as a single group of friends or family. This is a significant story element in *Once Before I Go,* which centres around a small friend group and the gradual mythologisation of one of the group members, Bernard, whose untimely death turns him into a guardian angel for his loved ones.

Through his theatre productions, Phillip McMahon shows mythologies to be not only an important element in the construction of queer identities and communities, but also necessary in the development of queer politics. As Christopher Looby and Michael North observe, citing Sam See: "It's only when queerness made mythologies that it was able to

[31] Ibid.

make politics".[32] Indeed, the process of actively writing and performing an erased mythology back into both a community vernacular and the public consciousness has significant political potential for queer activism. This is especially important since there are tensions between the mythologies emerging from the queer community, and the ways in which queer mythologies have historically been enacted by the Irish state. As Ed Madden notes, given Ireland's "long tradition of using familial and sexual figures to allegorize national material",[33] gay men have often been deployed as easy, superficial symbols of progress, erasing the nuances of queer identity formation and essentially robbing queerness of its inherent political potential. Queer-made cultural expressions such as Phillip McMahon's plays counteract this appropriative process and manage to show not only the socio-political and personal difficulties the queer community faces in the construction of their own history and mythology, but also their unique beauty and joy.

[32] Christopher Looby and Michael North, "Introduction," in *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* by Sam See (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020): 6.
[33] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 250.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 What is Myth?

According to Sam See, as he states in his volume on queer mythologies in modernist literature, "myth traditionally aims to convey cultural universals and ideas".[34] In other words, although myths and mythological figures can largely assumed to be fictional to some extent, they do aim to serve as a common societal framework. Shonagh Hill notes that "the universal appeal of myth contains its repressive aspect as it attempts to freeze time and reaffirm a unified narrative of the past which supports the dominant ideology of the day".[35] In other words, myths serve as a stabilising factor, contextualising and validating contemporary beliefs and points of view. They are, then, something individuals can refer back to in order to better understand something, someone, or even themselves, as this mythological frame reflects the society it emerges from.

Keith D. Parry likewise observes how social phenomena are frequently a result of such overarching beliefs and ideologies[36] which shape myths. Myths, consequently, have a significant influence on life's social aspects, as they represent the beliefs and ideologies which influence people in their relationships and reactions to one another. Katja Lindqvist even states that "narratives, metaphors and myth are tools used in everyday life as well as in scholarly work for understanding and argument, and are central for a human understanding of the world";[37] Myths, then, are a vital part of the human lived experience, as they have the ability to fill in the gaps where simple logic may not suffice, and to frame our perceptions and responses. Perspectives on myths have over the course of history slowly shifted from a content-based approach to a form-based approach, which allows for a more fluid conceptualisation of mythologies, enabling processes of reinterpretation and new mythmaking Considering mythologies truly that significant, then, it is important to define what a myth is.

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[34] Sam See, "Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in *The Young and Evil,"* in *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020): 195.
[35] Shonagh Hill, "Introduction: a Creative Female Corporeality," in *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 11.
[36] Keith D. Parry, ""The formation of heroes and the myth of national identity," *Sport in Society* 24, No 6 (2021): 888, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1733531
[37] Katja Lindqvist, "The myth of management as art and the management of art as myth," in *Organizational Epics and Sagas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 132.

Susan Sellers discusses various definitions, many of which are contextualised by "the complex interactions between life and story that seem the generating force of myth".[38] While definitions vary, they are unified by some factors: myths are inherited, commonly shared, and serve to explain the world where fact and logic falter; as Shonagh Hill states, myths are "traditional stories passed down through the ages which serve to explain the world and its order to society".[39] Indeed, a popular view of myth in the nineteenth and early twentieth century is that it was a way for primitive people to understand the world, as they lacked sufficient scientific knowledge to explain everything that more 'civilised' people were able to comprehend. As Sellers notes, the prevailing approach to myth was "an ongoing endeavour to connect mythology to human origins".[40] Despite the fact that this point of view prevailed for quite a while, myth slowly came to be regarded with a more philosophical, critical lens. Freud also connects myth to a primitive infancy period, posing that children utilise myths to come to terms with things they do not yet understand, but which a scientifically minded adult may comprehend more easily, even though this adult may still deploy myths to engage with difficult or incomprehensive situations.[41] Although this correlates with current views on how myths aid humanity in understanding the world, this view does still connect mythologies to concepts of childishness and non-civilised thinking. In this vein, Joseph Campbell has even described myths as a "second womb";[42] myths are a tool, a protective layer against all that is strange and potentially dangerous.

However, Sellers notes how Carl Jung's theories on myth, which significantly influence current reflections on the function of mythologies, counteract this somewhat rigid conception. Sellers observes how Jung insists on a theorisation of myth not focused on content, but on form:

> For Jung, myths […] are the symbols of inner, unconscious drama which only become accessible through projection and telling. As such they offer crucial messages, providing insights into unrealised or neglected aspects of personality and issuing warnings of imbalance or wrong action. Jung insists that it is the structure rather than the content of myth which constitutes its power, since the structure is transhistorical while the content is relevant only within a specific time and place.[43]

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[38] Susan Sellers, "Contexts: Theories of Myth," in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001): 1.
[39] Hill, "Introduction," 10.
[40] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 3.
[41] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 4.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 5-6.

This observation coincides with the idea of approaching myth not as a concept, but as a language, as theorised by Barthes.[44] Indeed, Jung's conceptualisation allows for a much more fluid approach to myth which also unlocks the potential of reinterpretation and rewriting, since the myths which are passed down from generation to generation are no longer set in stone. The message of a myth may change, then, even if the form and the language remain the same. This language and this form are universally accessible, meaning anyone who wishes to access the process of myth-writing and mythmaking may do so. Sellers notes Marina Warner's subsequent emphasis on the fact that "any new tellings are at least as authentic as those of antiquity".[45] Though it is true that those myths from antiquity are pervasive, as they reflect the more patriarchal and hetero/cis-normative ideals which still significantly shape contemporary society, this form-based approach to mythologies enables a more fluid view on inherited mythologies which leaves room for deconstruction, reinterpretation, and new ways of creating meaning.

2.2 Queer Mythologies and Irish Theatre

Critical and creative engagement with mythologies is a pervasive force on the Irish stage. As Shonagh Hill notes, "Irish theatre has long been steeped in mythic narratives".[46] Although these mythic narratives play a large role in the Irish theatrical canon, Hill discusses the subsequent perpetuation of regressive ideals, particularly with regard to women and female experiences: the idealised myths which are so prevalent in Irish theatre lock women in a position of silent icon, symbolising what supported the ideology of the patriarchal structure at the time of its creation.[47] In that sense, women are denied access to the language of mythology and are reduced to content-based iconicity, denying them agency in the creation of their own meaning. Yet Sellers, citing Barthes, notes: "our best weapon against myth is to mythify in turn".[48] Indeed, Hill proposes a significant canon of female writers and performers who actively deconstruct such regressive myths and rewrite them. Marina Carr is a clear example of this process, as she often draws on classic myths, recontextualising them for contemporary Ireland and rewriting their message. Carr, and the other women playwrights

[44] Sellers, "Contexts: Theories of Myth," 6.
[45] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 7.
[46] Hill, "Introduction," 1.
[47] Hill, "Introduction," 3.
[48] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 31.

and theatre practitioners discussed in Hill's book, "challenge and rewrite the myths imposed on them, and shift their role from bearing to creating and controlling meaning".[49] She specifically notes the role of theatre and performance in this process of creation and destruction: performance allows women to literally embody myths, drawing attention to the consequences mythical narratives have on their lived experience and (bodily) autonomy.[50]

Consequently, theatre is significant in processes of 'mythifying' the self and the physical world. The language of theatre is a mythical language, not only in the form of literal scripts and texts, but also in the form of performance and body language. Similarly to myth, the theatre offers narratives which may aid its receivers in understanding or reinterpreting the world. As Sissel Horghagen notes, "in drama, subjunctivizing realities are used to explore human possibilities rather than settled certainties".[51] It makes sense, then, that theatre and myth tend to intersect. Hill does note, however, that these intersections often function in service of a male-dominated literary canon which leaves little room for marginalised groups to access the mythical language of theatre.[52] Therefore, it is not enough to simply allow these groups access and recover older, exceptional instances of significant work by a member of an ostracised community. Rather, Hill insists on a reintegration of marginalised voices in the historical and mythological fabric, in this case specifically female voices, and writing them back into the genealogy of Irish theatre.[53] This not only draws attention to significant work which may have otherwise disappeared, but also contests the idea that female voices exists in the margins, since that supports the conceptualisation of the Irish theatrical canon as a male-dominated space in the first place.

Hill's reflections on the deployment of myth as an embodied, fluid language speaking against long-perpetuated regressive ideals on the Irish stage may not only be useful in contesting the marginalisation of female voices, but also queer voices. J. Paul Halferty has noted that the presence of queer perspectives in Irish theatre is only a recent phenomenon,[54] but a significant one, since it serves to contest conservative ideas of sexuality and gender. In that sense, queer mythologies can be employed to pose significant questions on the nature of normativity, similarly to Hill's female mythologies which criticise and deconstruct the

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[49] Hill, "Introduction," 8.
[50] Hill, "Introduction," 10.
[51] Sissel Horghagen, "Theatre as Meaning Making of the Self," *Ergoterapeuten* 2, No 12 (2011): 55.
[52] Hill, "Introduction," 2.
[53] Ibid.
[54] J. Paul Halferty, "Performing Politics: Queer Theatre in Ireland, 1968-2017," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance*, edited by Eamonn Jordan and Eric Weitz (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018): 182.

patriarchal cultural canon. Because of the nature of queerness, however, queer mythologies are not comparable to female mythologies in all aspects. Queer activism contains a paradox, which Ed Madden observes, describing queerness as "not a simple category of counternormative resistance but a process of identity formation and belonging that is inevitably contingent and possibly complicit with normative economic or political formations".[55] In other words, if queer politics, like feminist politics, strives to be normalised, for example through the use of queer or queered myths which question the normativity of mythological frameworks, queerness's radical political potential may suffer as a result. It is this paradoxical relationship with normative structures, such as historical, mythological and cultural canons, which complicates the intersection of queerness and myth.

Sam See touches on this oxymoron, defining myths as something which are both a lie and true at the same time, as they deal not in facts but in possibilities.[56] Indeed, queerness functions along similar lines. Madden cites José Esteban Muñoz, explaining how "queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world".[57] In that sense, myth and queerness overlap and can intersect fruitfully. However, if queer myths consequently function like Susan Sellers' feminist mythologies, inciting a cycle of destruction and creation which stems from this realm of possibilities, they encounter the dilemma of what, exactly, is being created. Sellers observes that "feminist rewriting can […] be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives".[58] Feminist mythologies, then, have a clear goal, as Shonagh Hill notes: contesting the idea of patriarchal normativity, and reconstructing this normative structure to include female voices and perspectives.[59] Queerness, however, as discussed above, consciously exists in the margins, rejecting normativity, yet also craving normalisation through, for example, the inclusion of queer perspectives in history and mythology.

Conner et al. observe that the need for historical and mythological inclusion has become more pressing recently, as its erasure "has resulted in lesbians, gay, bisexuals, and transgendered persons reaching the conclusion that they (we) are without history – or

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[55] Ed Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Irish Studies,* edited by Renée Fox Mike Cronin, and Brian Ó Conchubhair, (Oxon: Routledge, 2021): 250.
[56] See, "Making Modernism New," 200.
[57] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 248.
[58] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 30.
[59] Hill, "Introduction," 10-11.

herstory".[60] The systemic erasure of queerness in mythological and spiritual narratives, they note, is an oppressive technique of cultural domination,[61] resulting in the lack of a social community, a "ready-made map",[62] as Fintan Walsh has called it. As communities often build on a shared history and mythology, a lack of such unifying structures precludes community building and maintaining. Joseph A. Boone observes that "the future frontiers envisioned by current queer theory and practice depend on knowing the history of how we got to where we are to today".[63] In other words, in order to move into new possible futures, the queer community does seem to need a solid historical and mythological repertoire to refer back to, not only to emerge, but also to continue to exist. It is a praxis which fights cultural oppression, and which, according to Connor et al., celebrates queerness "in a manner that embraces yet also reaches beyond the personal, toward the collective and transpersonal realms of experience".[64] In other words, the relationship between queerness and mythology may be paradoxical and complicated, but it is precisely this fluidity which paves the way for community formation and new possible futures.

2.3 Myths of People

As discussed above, it is not the content, but the form of a myth which determines its social and cultural influence.[65] Yet myths come in many different forms, which each function slightly differently based on their context and use. Christopher Flood notes that myths are often concerned with the origins of things, and come in the shape of theogonies, concerning the origins of gods; cosmogonies, concerning the origins of the world; sociogonies, concerning the origins of society and/or cultural heroes; and anthropogenies, concerning the origins of human beings.[66] In approaching Phillip McMahon's plays, it would be fruitful to focus on sociogonies and theogonies, since (variations on) these myths feature centrally in *I Am Tonie Walsh* (2018), *Come On Home* (2018), and *Once Before I Go* (2021).

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[60] Connor, Sparks, & Sparks, "Introduction," x.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Fintan Walsh, "Introduction," in *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016): 15.
[63] Joseph A. Boone, "Go West: An Introduction," in *Queer Frontiers,* edited by Joseph A. Boone et al., (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000): 10.
[64] Connor, Sparks, & Sparks, "Introduction," xi.
[65] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 4.
[66] Christopher Flood, "Myth and Ideology," in *Thinking Through Myths,* edited by Kevin Schilbrack (London: Routledge, 2002): 175.

I Am Tonie Walsh is a documentary play about "godfather of gay"[67] Tonie Walsh, a type of cultural hero from Flood's theory, though in calling him a "godfather", Walsh could also be connected to theogonies, becoming an almost divine figure in the queer cultural canon. As Susan Sellers observes, "the mythical hero is often presented as a divinity or semi-divinity for the hearer to emulate".[68] Cultural heroes who reach a mythical status, then, are absorbed into a specific mythical canon to serve as an inspirational, hopeful, and guiding presence. This is important specifically in the context of queer myths, since, as discussed above, the queer community has few historically implemented mythological frameworks to refer back to. The community has to either find or create their own queer mythological heroes. This is vital especially for the self-celebratory aspect of mythology which Connor et al. note, observing how queer myths may aid the community in "honouring ourselves".[69] As myths often involve a sacred dimension, mythifying important queer cultural figures insists on a freedom to admire and even worship, which more conservative societal contexts may not allow.

In her discussion of female mythmaking, Sellers makes a similar point. If the divine, and all its accompanying myths, is male-centred, there is no place for women: "as woman has no corresponding divinity she can neither establish her subjectivity nor archive a goal of her own; the ideal imposed on her is man and the most divine goal she can achieve is to become a man".[70] Along the same lines, queer communities have a necessity for queer divine or mythological figures to inspire them, as they insist there is space in society for queerness in all its forms. Flood notes that "myths have the cultural status of sacred truths in the societies or groups to which they belong";[71] in other words, despite the generally fictionalised nature of mythological narratives, they have some aspect of truth to them, whether that be a factual origin, or the moral message the myth imposes on its listener. Queer mythological heroes, then, insist on the truth of queerness existing, counteracting the erasure of queer identities and validating them instead. As Sellers notes, marginalised groups which mythify their own members "can only reach this autonomy if we posit a God, place, or path to inspire us forward".[72] Tonie Walsh, for example, was alive to help McMahon in narrating his own life,

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[67] "*I Am Tonie Walsh*," THISISPOPBABY website, accessed September 23rd, 2022, https://thisispopbaby.com/shows/i-am-tonie-walsh/

[68] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 11.

[69] Connor, Sparks, & Sparks, "Introduction," xi.

[70] Susan Sellers, "Becoming Gods and Umbilical Wordbows," *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001): 65.

[71] Flood, "Myth and Ideology," 176.

[72] Sellers, "Becoming Gods and Umbilical Wordbows," 65.

enabling him to mythify himself. Thus, he and McMahon consciously oppose the mythification of queer figures by outside forces, as observed by Ed Madden.[73]

This mythification of queerness exercised by individuals who exist outside of the queer community often stems from political or capitalist motivations. For example, as Jennifer M. Wolowic et al. note, the rainbow pride flag, which is an important symbol within the queer community, is often used by corporations for profit, not to truly support the queer community, whereas within the community the flag is a powerful source of pride and support.[74] This already shows a pertinent contradiction between the use of symbolism within and outside of the queer community. Additionally, queer symbols and myths may be deployed from outside the community in a harmful way. For example, during the AIDS crisis, the most likely victims – homosexual men – were frequently posed as symbols for moral depravity and sin. Richard Poirier noted, as early as 1988, that "the discourse against AIDS has become increasingly a moralistic condemnation of homosexuality, empowered by the doctrinal and biblical interpretations of sex and nature that are ancient in origin".[75] In other words, queer bodies became symbols for something negative by nature, for deserved suffering and sexual depravity. The mythologies pertaining to queer bodies and identities became dangerous and harmful to the queer community. Poirier observes how "to expose and condemn the sexual mythologies […] in the discourse on AIDS ought to be undertaken in the hope that we can hand on a less cruel world than we have inherited",[76] thus underlining the importance of contesting queer myths imposed on the world from outside of the queer community.

This is significant even if those myths are, in a way, well-meant. Madden notes that during the Celtic Tiger, the gay man embodied the myth of modernity and progress, but this also denied this particular queer body its agency and political potential,[77] simply because the queer body had no agency in what meaning was imposed upon it. The queer community is, as Wolowic et al. note, particularly vulnerable to mental and physical health risks, especially the young community members.[78] In that sense, the imposition of myths on queer bodies has a significant impact on the owners of those bodies. Sam See, in his discussion of queer

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[73] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 250.

[74] Jennifer M. Wolowic et al., "Chasing the Rainbow: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth and Pride Semiotics," *Culture, health & sexuality* 19, No 5 (2017): 559. DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2016.1251613

[75] Richard Poirier, "AIDS and traditions of Homophobia," *Social Research* 55, No 3 (1988): 462.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 249-250.

[78] Wolowic et al., "Chasing the Rainbow," 557.

postmodern literature, observes "the particular queer need for myth to be reconceived".[79] When queer myths extend beyond the body, and include the individual, i.e. the identity contained within the body, they allow for more agency and for new queer mythologies, creating a previously lacking mythological framework for a community much in need of one. This also leaves room for the conception of queer mythological heroes which may still serve political goals, but in service of queer emancipation. Mythified queer figures serve as inspiration, as a source of validation, and enable the queer community to take back social and political agency over their own narrative and reflect on their own situations and identities.

2.4 Myths of Places

In addition to having mythical heroes to emulate, a community also needs a safe space to flourish. For the queer community, however, this is a complicated matter. Gilly Hartal has noted how, since the 1990s, it has become a commonplace notion that spaces are constructed from a heteronormative perspective, through "…diverse overt and covert mechanisms of spatial control" which indicate "ongoing suppression of non-normative sexualities, governing and silencing LGBT desires and embodiments in space".[80] A space where queer identities are accepted and celebrated, then, seems nearly impossible, almost mythical. Hartal does note, however, that spaces can be negotiated,[81] and therefore changed. Consequently, queer safe spaces need to be actively created, as they are not included in mainstream social settings. Additionally, safety for the queer community requires different aspects compared to non-queer communities, as Hartal observes: "not merely physical safety but psychological, social, and emotional safety as well".[82] This broad set of needs complicates the idea of a queer safe space. Some scholars have even posed the question of whether a true safe space is possible at all,[83] as it seems unrealistic that there is one unified queer safe space where all identities, with all their intersectional aspects and varying wants and needs, have equal access to safety. In that sense, the queer safe space becomes a myth.

Jen Jack Gieseking describes queer safe spaces in urban contexts as stars, a bright constellation which connects queer individuals and helps them navigate and contextualise the

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[79] See, "Making Modernism New," 208-209.

[80] Gilly Hartal, "Fragile Subjectivities: Constructing Queer Safe Spaces," *Social & Cultural Geography* 19, No 8 (2018): 1055. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2017.1335877

[81] Ibid.

[82] Hartal, "Fragile Subjectivities," 1056.

[83] Hartal, "Fragile Subjectivities," 1057.

world and their own existence.[84] Even if they are geographical locations, she notes, these shared safe spaces are not something queer individuals permanently reside in;[85] the overarching social structure in which the queer community exists is still largely non-queer-normative, a universe in which these stars exist as tiny, but visible, dots of light. In how they function, then, queer safe spaces function much like myths. As Susan Sellers observes, myths "posit an ideal precedent that warrants the validity of things as they are".[86] Similarly, queer safe spaces are created because of an ideal, a hope for what social life may look like for the queer community. Like myths, and like queerness, queer safe spaces deal in possibilities. As Gieseking observes:

> Lesbians' and queers' everyday geographies lent themselves to a wide range of what queer space is and could be, and led me to the mythical, calendrical, and navigational qualities of constellations. Ways of coming together, like people, change over time. Some new and some old lines and stars of participants accumulate into constellations, while some memories also fade as stars implode, get lost from view by pollution or fading eyesight, or are obscured by newer stars.[87]

In other words, queer safe spaces, or even just queer spaces, have a changeable, fluid quality to them. Like myths, the form remains solid, but the content and execution change. This complicates the construction of queer safe spaces – there is no one right version. Hartal even names queer safe space construction "an obscure and unachievable utopia",[88] yet it is exactly this utopic, mythical quality which underlines the vital importance of queer space creation. Although this process may lead to conflict, it also allows the queer community to reflect on their own identities, needs, and possibilities for a better future.

Both myths of queer people and myths of queer (safe) spaces are deeply intertwined with ideas of community, and these myths are shown to be essential in the creation of such a community. Additionally, queer mythologies have a similar power as Shonagh Hill's embodied female mythologies: the power to disrupt, reclaim, and thus rewrite a non-inclusive mythological and cultural canon. Especially in theatre, the force of queer mythologies comes to the fore, since the very act of performance allows queer bodies, which have often been negatively mythified to signify something in service of regressive political aims, to literally

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[84] Gieseking, "Mapping Lesbian and Queer Lines of Desire: Constellations of Queer Urban Space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, No 5 (2020): 946-947. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820926513
[85] Gieseking, "Queer Lines of Desire," 942.
[86] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 3.
[87] Gieseking, "Queer Lines of Desire," 954.
[88] Hartal, "Fragile Subjectivities," 1069.

embody new queer mythologies in support of queer community building. Phillip McMahon's oeuvre will underline this importance of queer mythologies through the plays' utilisation of queer myths of place and of people, to facilitate community formation.

2.5 Methodology

The theoretical framework outlined above has established a clear idea of what mythology is, and how it functions differently for a marginalised community such as the queer community by building on Shonagh Hill's concept of embodied mythmaking. The subsequent chapters will operationalise these insights to establish how queer mythologies can be deployed as political strategies to increase community strength and visibility by analysing how these mythologies function within the oeuvre of Phillip McMahon. This will be done through a close reading of each of the three plays, focusing on myths of people and myths of place.

Firstly, this thesis will establish how mythological herodom is constructed in *I Am Tonie Walsh* (2018), *Come On Home* (2018), and *Once Before I Go* (2021). Then, by building on theories of mythological heroes and the meaning of herodom within the queer community, the value of queer mythological heroes and saints will be established by analysing the ways in which McMahon both constructs and problematises a variety of authority and exemplary figures in his plays. It will use, for example, Georges-Claude Guilbert and Bradley Forenza's conceptualisations of queer icons and the mythological, even legendary status these icons often enjoy within the community. Through the ways in which both the fictional characters in McMahon's plays and audience members relate to the established mythological figures in each narrative, this thesis will emphasise the importance of queer representation in exemplary positions of power, as these positions determine modes of self-appreciation and self-identification for a vulnerable community.

Secondly, this thesis will explore the inclusion of mythological places in McMahon's plays, using, amongst others, Andrew Gorman-Murray's theory of queer migration and Kian Goh's observations on queer urban safe spaces. With these theories in mind, this thesis will analyse the way the characters in McMahon's plays move across different spaces, and how each place is mythologised through the promises with which it motivates the characters to migrate. These movements, and the mythological places which cause them to occur, will be used to show how queer myths of place are used and are necessary to function as pilgrimage locations which queer individuals may visit to discover or rediscover themselves, their community, and their specific wants and needs. This analysis will be conducted with the reality of the majority of these places in mind, connecting it to ideas of heritage sites and their

ability to uphold and communicate queer mythologies and legacies to the younger queer generations.

In its conclusion, this thesis will then bring the observations resulting from these textual analyses together and extrapolate them through the brief case study of Panti Bliss, the famous Irish drag queen and leading queer activist. It will explore both Panti Bliss as a drag persona, but also the theatre performances and TV appearances she has made, drawing on Fintan Walsh and Emer O'Toole's scholarship on Bliss's importance within Irish queer history and performance studies. This will show that the observed necessity of queer mythologies is not unique to the theatre of Phillip McMahon, but rather is relevant to Irish queer performance as a whole.

3 Queer Myths of People

3.1 Chapter Outline

As Susan Sellers notes, heroes and icons, people who inspire and who can be emulated, are a necessity for marginalised communities in order for them to gain a sense of autonomy,[89] and to be emancipated. Whereas her observations mostly pertain to the emancipation of women within mythology, they can, as explained above, also be applied to the queer community, another marginalised community, but one which exists within a different context and thus has other socio-political nuances. This chapter will connect the idea of queer mythological people, within these contexts and their subsequent nuances, to *I Am Tonie Walsh* (2018), *Come On Home* (2018) and *Once Before I Go* (2021). These connections and analyses will underline the need for internal queer myth-making, e.g. from within the community; the dangers of the lack of proper mythical heroes for a vulnerable community, the subsequent need for positive and realistic representation; and the vital importance of agency and narrative control.

First, the unique aspects of queer herodom and iconicity will be explained, especially in their connection to the social and political merits of queer myths of people. The use of and need for queer mythification from within the queer community will be underlined, and then linked to each of the three productions, which all feature and exemplify this need in their own unique way. In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* the concept of self-mythification will be discussed, as it is an autobiographical documentary play which Phillip McMahon wrote together with Tonie Walsh. The way Walsh and McMahon construct the narrative along the lines of the traditional hero journey will be highlighted, and what the implications are for Walsh's importance and status as a hero within the Irish queer scene. In *Come On Home,* the need for queer heroes in order to allow queer people to safely discover themselves will be examined through the play's problematisation of exemplary community heroes in a small Irish town, where authority figures are reframed as power abusers and bad influences on the community members they should be helping and inspiring. In *Once Before I Go,* the importance of queer agency in matters of symbolisation and mythification will be discussed through the character of Bernard, who actively and consciously constructs the myth of himself throughout the narrative and thus manages to inspire and posthumously influence the people he is closest to.

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[89] Susan Sellers, "Becoming Gods and Umbilical Wordbows," *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001): 65.

3.2 Queer Heroes, Queer Icons, and their Political Potential

In discussing queer icons and heroes, it is important to note that figures who attain a mythological status within the queer community do not necessarily have to identify as queer themselves. In Georges-Claude Guilbert's book on the worship of female entertainers by gay men, for example, he notes that "the *a minima* definition of a gay icon could be a celebrity who is particularly liked by gays", although he also points to the fact that this definition is quite limiting and leaves little room for nuance.[90] This does mean, however, that reaching the status of a gay icon does not necessarily entail being part of the queer community. In fact, Guilbert points to the fact that "the gay icon tends to be heterosexual",[91] and "genetically female gay icons do tend to be camp".[92] Indeed, names such as Judy Garland, Liza Minelli, Mae West, Lady Gaga and Madonna are frequently mentioned in discussions on gay iconicity, and the particular connection gay men feel when it comes to female entertainers and pop divas.

Craig Jennex likewise observes that "the icon becomes an emblematic figure who unites the community and represents a specific gay experience to participants and nonparticipants alike".[93] Jennex also points to the fact that the worship of pop diva Lady Gaga stems from the fact that her aesthetics and use of camp align with the use of those same elements by the gay community, being "a subversive and over-the-top performance style that has the power to represent gay lives".[94] Representing a gay experience, then, does not necessarily entail being gay; rather, as Guilbert notes, gay iconicity is all about identification.[95] The character Bernard, a gay man, in McMahon's *Once Before I Go* (2021), which will be discussed in more detail below, illustrates this identification when discussing his fascination with Judy Garland:

BERNARD:

It's a distancing technique. We are abstracting our own hurt, our own trauma. Judy's pain is not simply Judy's pain, Judy's pain is my pain too.[96]

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[90] Georges-Claude Guilbert, "Introduction," in *Gay Icons: The (Mostly) Female Entertainers Gay Men Love,* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2018): 2.
[91] Guilbert, "Introduction," 6.
[92] Guilbert, "Introduction," 7.
[93] Craig Jennex, "Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia," in *Popular Music and Society* 36, No 3 (2013): 346. DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2013.798544
[94] Jennex, "Diva Worship," 352.
[95] Guilbert, "Introduction," 4.
[96] Phillip McMahon, *Once Before I Go* (London: Methuen Drama, 2021): 76.

In other words, gay icon worship entails representation of an experience that is specific to the community, which both validates this experience and enables the search for identity within the gay community.

The gay community, however, is part of the queer community; these terms are not interchangeable, and not all icons function along the same lines. Guilbert points to this distinction, noting that the gay community is "modern, consumerist, assimilationist", and "in contrast, queers tend to be postmodern, less consumerist, […] and reject social/sexual categories".[97] Personalities who are considered icons within the gay community may not be icons within the queer community, which both envelops the gay community and simultaneously and paradoxically rejects the very idea of such distinct categories within its own queer framework. Lady Gaga may be a gay icon, yet her connection to a specific part of the queer community – Guilbert notes how it is a known fact even in heterosexual contexts that liking gay icons such as Lady Gaga, Joan Crawford or Barbra Streisand, automatically insinuates gayness[98] – creates a set boundary and categorical divide which queerness attempts to supersede. Therefore, I will focus on queer icons which are themselves part of the queer community, and consequently able to embody, understand, and navigate the complex framework of intersectional queer identities. Adhering to Guilbert's observation on how the motivation behind icon and hero worship is identification, the most fruitful candidate for queer iconicity is someone who is themselves queer. Ilan H. Meyer notes that queer people "evaluate themselves in comparison with others who are like them rather than with members of the dominant culture".[99] Since this dominant culture does not actively encourage the mythification of queer individuals, the queer community has to actively stimulate the queer mythification process themselves.

Julie Reid explains that "there are no formal limits on myth as it is not defined by its signifier but by the signified, which is attached to the object of signification, and since all objects can be signified, everything can be mythologised".[100] Everyone, then, can participate in the process of mythologising, since it is by nature open-ended. Additionally, Reid notes

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[97] Guilbert, "Introduction," 3.
[98] Guilbert, "Introduction," 1.
[99] Bradley Forenza, "Exploring the Affirmative Role of Gay Icons in Coming Out," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 6, No 4 (2017): 339. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000117
[100] Julie Reid, "Mythological Representation in Popular Culture Today," *Communicatio* 33, No 2 (2007): 81. DOI: 10.1080/02500160701685425

how "myths are constantly finding new objects of signification while discarding old ones".[101] In other words, mythologies exist in flux, as the society which creates them, with all the varying individuals who have access to processes of myth-making, shifts and changes over time. Myths, after all, both reflect and affirm dominant societal ideologies, and these ideologies are beginning to be altered to include a positive point of view towards the queer community. Bradley Forenza observes that "societal attitudes toward gays and lesbians have become more favourable in recent years", yet also notes that the queer community still experiences frequent marginalisation and discrimination.[102] In other words, while progress is being made, there is a reason why the queer community has to remain politically active, and actively create queer mythological heroes for themselves.

Büşra Hafci and Gül Erbay Aslitürk note that with "the increase of intercultural interaction, myths have begun to diversify".[103] Indeed, coinciding with Reid's observation that anything can be mythologised, mythologies are open to increasingly diverse interpretations which allow space for marginalised communities. She explains that myths "function as a sort of orienting force, supplying readers with a (fictional) sense of their individual place in history and society".[104] In other words, mythologies provide both social and historical context, and validation, which is why it is especially important for more vulnerable communities such as the queer community to see themselves represented in myths. Forenza notes that "many LGBT youth find resilience through a shared identity with others who happen to be LGBT", and that "in the absence of immediately accessible gay-affirming individuals or role models, questioning youth may 'evaluate' themselves through parasocial relationships with gay or gay-affirming figures from popular culture and media".[105] Representation, then, of fictional or fictionalised – or, indeed, mythologised – queer figures, provides this sense of orientation, affirmation and historical and social validation inherent to mythologies. It allows queer individuals to connect with and even find comfort within the social and parasocial relationships they develop with queer mythologies, and specifically with heroes and icons.

In the case of queer mythical figures, it is important to note who is performing the mythologisation, and who is involved in the mythmaking process. It is equally vital, then, to

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[101] Reid, "Mythological Representation," 83.
[102] Forenza, "Exploring the Affirmative Role," 339.
[103] Büşra Hafci and Gül Erbay Aslitürk, "Superheroes: Myths of Modern Age?", *Idil Journal of Art and Language* 6, No 30 (2017): 499-500. DOI: 10.7816/idil-06-30-02
[104] Reid, "Mythological Representation," 83.
[105] Forenza, "Exploring the Affirmative Role," 339.

discern what the goal behind the mythmaking process is, as myths reflect and affirm dominant ideological ideas in society. Julie Reid states that "where ideologies are systems of ideas that equip us to interact with our world, we should pay critical attention to the legitimising apparatuses of our ideological frameworks (myths), and the mediums in which they operate".[106] Indeed, the same mythology, and thus the same queer mythological figure, bears a different set of meanings and connotations depending on which social group tells and creates the myth. Reid notes how the influence of mythologies can be both positive and negative: myths can aid in upholding progressive ideologies and create a hopeful and stable order in society, but they can also "disrupt that order by encouraging a negative or fictional idea about a certain group of people or an issue".[107] This is especially pertinent for myths pertaining to the queer community, which, being positioned at the margins of society, is more easily subject to the influence of harmful myths about their identities. The meaning of a queer person or body depends on who is mythifying the person or body in question. A queer individual who exemplifies the complications and merits of queer herodom and iconicity from within the queer community in Ireland is the famous DJ and activist Tonie Walsh, who presented the 2019 play *I Am Tonie Walsh,* which he co-authored with Phillip McMahon.

3.3 *I Am Tonie Walsh*: Self-mythification and Herodom

Phillip McMahon and Tonie Walsh's *I Am Tonie Walsh* premiered at the Projects Arts Centre in Dublin in November 2018. The play tells the life story of Tonie Walsh, a prolific Irish DJ and activist, who founded the Irish Queer Archive, is a former president of the National LGBT Federation, and is a founding editor of *Gay Community News*.[108] Tonie Walsh narrates and performs this story, which is "about active citizenship, creativity over consumption, and community",[109] intercut by relevant songs. The narrative charts the course of Walsh's life from before he was even born, starting with the extraordinary life of his great-grandmother and her involvement with the suffragette movement, to his birth, his navigation of his own queer identity, and on to the present day, ending the play by offering a call to action for a more progressive future. Rather than being a list of factual information, Walsh tells the story

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[106] Reid, "Mythological Representation," 94.
[107] Reid, "Mythological Representation," 95.
[108] Una Mullally, "I Am Tonie Walsh: 'Godfather of Gay' brings LGBT history to life," in *The Irish Times,* November 26th, 2018. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/i-am-tonie-walsh-godfather-of-gay-brings-lgbt-history-to-life-1.3706932
[109] "*I Am Tonie Walsh*," THISISPOPBABY website, accessed November 5th, 2022, https://thisispopbaby.com/shows/i-am-tonie-walsh/

through an eclectic number of personal anecdotes, including his interactions with seminal figures in Irish queer history, such as Mary Robinson, who would become Ireland's first woman president, and Panti Bliss, the legendary Irish drag queen and activist.

I Am Tonie Walsh is a documentary play. As Stuart Young notes, "theatre is in fact ideally suited to the documentary project: its inherent ability to draw explicit attention to the interplay of absence and presence makes it an ideal site for foregrounding the complicated relationship between representation and reality".[110] Yet he also goes on to note that audiences and even theatre makers tend to believe in the truth of the representation that is created on the stage, even with the influence of poststructuralist thinking on notions of reality and fact.[111] Despite the fact that the narrative is based on fact, then, documentary theatre remains a representation of a truth, not the definitive truth. It seeks to offer a perspective. Young additionally observes how "'fictitious' discourse may actually be closer than ostensibly objective discourse to the real, whereas, as Philip Sidney observed, 'in history, looking for truth, [one] may go away full fraught with falsehood'."[112] In other words, even if the version of a narrative offered by a documentary play may not be objective – insofar objectivity is obtainable at all – but that does not invalidate the value of the truth that the play proposes. This is especially pertinent when a documentary play deals with previously repressed or erased histories.

Una Mullally, reviewing the production for *The Irish Times*, states that Tonie Walsh is "a repository of stories within a community whose history has a tendency to be lost".[113] Indeed, in *I Am Tonie Walsh*, McMahon and Walsh place him firmly at the centre of Ireland's queer history, highlighting his involvement in action groups and political movements, and his interactions with important figures in the queer community. Tonie Walsh thus comes to represent Ireland's queer activism, functioning as the physical embodiment of queer stories and histories: a living archive. McMahon, writing for Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), recalls:

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[110] Stuart Young. "Playing with Documentary Theatre: Aalst and Taking Care of Baby," *New Theatre Quarterly* 25, No 1 (2009): 72. doi:10.1017/S0266464X09000074
[111] Ibid.
[112] Young. "Playing with Documentary Theatre," 86.
[113] Mullally, "I Am Tonie Walsh: 'Godfather of Gay' brings LGBT history to life."

> Tonie was telling me his story, but for the first time in my life I was hearing my own story. My own history that was hidden from me in mainstream Ireland. He was telling me our story. So I wanted to bring our story to the stage. For more people to experience Tonie's fabulousness, or for him to simply happen to you too.[114]

Walsh's apparent ability, as a queer hero and icon, to embody an erased history, and to serve as a point of reference for the queer community who feels this lack of history most sharply, plays into Craig Jennex's notion that the ability of an icon to connect and bring together members of a specific culture and community " serves as a fundamental attraction of their adoration".[115] Indeed, inherent to a queer icon is the idea of serving as a unifying factor for the community, which Walsh achieves simply through his embodiment of both queer histories, and contested queer myths. Peter Crawley, reviewing the production for *The Irish Times,* calls Walsh "the chronicler of his time";[116] in other words, Walsh occupies an authority position where Irish queer history is concerned, and, during this performance, literally embodies all the queer stories, fictionalised or grounded, of the past.

Shonagh Hill discusses the embodiment of myths and mythmaking, noting how the body in performance opens up "the gap between body and representation, between corporeal reality and mythic icon, thereby undoing the authority and apparent fixity of myth".[117] In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* Walsh becomes the narrator of a forgotten queer history, contesting the myth of that history never existing in the first place, and recreating it on the stage by acting as the literal embodiment of queer histories (the living archive). Additionally, the fact that it is a performance means that the production relies on the presence of a script, polished by editing and research, enabling the suggestion of Walsh as someone who knows everything there is to know about queer history. Indeed, through the large number of poignant personal anecdotes which all relate to significant turning points in Irish queer history or involve a meeting with a seminal figure in Irish queer politics, the performance implies he knows all, saw all, and was present for all that he recounts: an Irish queer history that is both personal and, as McMahon recalls in his interview with RTÉ, applicable to and relatable for the entire queer

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[114] Phillip McMahon, "I Am Tonie Walsh: Ireland's Godfather of Gay Tells His Story," in *RTE,* November 25th, 2018. https://www.rte.ie/culture/2018/1123/1012978-i-am-tonie-walsh-irelands-godfather-of-gay-comes-to-the-stage/

[115] Craig Jennex, "Diva Worship and the Sonic Search for Queer Utopia," in *Popular Music and Society* 36, No 3 (2013): 355. DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2013.798544

[116] Peter Crawley, "Review: I Am Tonie Walsh: What is a Club DJ If Not a Keeper of Records?," in *The Irish Times,* November 29th, 2018. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/review-i-am-tonie-walsh-what-is-a-club-dj-if-not-a-keeper-of-records-1.3714660

[117] Shonagh Hill, "Introduction: a Creative Female Corporeality," in *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 8.

community.[118] This community may look at Walsh and allow him to symbolise and embody what the community needs: forgotten history, hopeful activism, queer legacy. As a mythic icon, Walsh serves a function for the queer community, something which McMahon and Walsh took care to emphasise in the production through a comprehensive depiction of this mythical icon's origins, journey to herodom, good deeds, and suffering, but with a twist: his story ends well, and is not yet finished.

In describing his own origins in the play, Walsh doesn't start with his birth, but with his great-grandmother Ina's life. She is described as "an incredible chain-smoking matriarch",[119] who encountered a variety of important historical figures over the course of her life. She married Hector Hughes, co-founder of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, someone who fought for women's rights and wrote the national anthem for Ghana; she helped Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards set up the Gate Theatre, and designed costumes for them for fifteen years, perhaps an early indication of their family's connection to the queer community within Irish history. In short, she was "fiercely independent".[120] His great-grandmother becomes an almost mythical figure herself, an inspiration for and progenitor of the generations after her. After all, in traditional Greek mythology, heroes were, as Gunnel Ekroth states, "mortal but still semi-divine";[121] they had godlike parents, and along those lines, Walsh has a great-grandmother of mythological status. Walsh notes:

> As someone who'd spent a childhood in Victorian times, her life had been shaped by some extraordinary experiences, scenes of social injustice, bullying, harassment, victimisation, and all that would inform so much of her worldview which she would have passed on to her daughter and her granddaughter, my mother Sylvia, as she was growing up.[122]

His great-grandmother influenced his grandmother, his mother, and him; shaped who he became, and passed on some of her mythological qualities to him. Myths are, after all, traditionally inherited; as Shonagh Hill states, "a nation's heritage is one of its unifying components, offering a sense of the past and future through a created collective consciousness of its people. Mythologies are part of this heritage".[123] Walsh's past, along those lines, is a

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[118] McMahon, "Godfather of Gay Tells His Story."
[119] Phillip McMahon and Tonie Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh*, script received from McMahon via email on September 29th, 2022, Third Draft (October 4th, 2018): 3.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Gunnel Ekroth, "Heroes and hero-cults," in *A Companion to Greek Religion,* ed. Daniel Ogden (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007): 102.
[122] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 3.
[123] Hill, "Introduction," 10.

matter of family legacy and heritage, steeped in myth which set the path for him to make sense of his own place in the world, and become who he was and still is for Ireland.

After clearly establishing the mythological hero's origins, *I Am Tonie Walsh* makes little mention of the narrative of Walsh's childhood and moves on to his young adulthood instead, when he was already deeply involved with queer activism and community building. Peter Crawley observes in his review of the production for *The Irish Times* how "much of Walsh's life (…) has been spent at the service of others".[124] Indeed, as Walsh recounts the mythic narrative of his life, there are multiple instances where he clarifies how he has influenced the Irish queer scene and the people surrounding him, in a neutral, factual manner. For example, Walsh notes:

> As the 80s rolled on, I was up to my neck in Dublin's gay political and social scene. All of my 20s was spent involved in the administration of NGF, street activism DJing and management of the Hirschfeld Centre.[125]

The Hirschfeld Centre was an important meeting place for queer individuals in Dublin; the fact that Walsh helped manage it underlines his involvement with community care and fostering a safe space for queerness. In that sense, as early as the eighties, there is evidence of Walsh's status as a hero and icon, as he actively creates and curates a sense of safety and stability within a vulnerable community, thus embodying inspiration and hope.

I Am Tonie Walsh also clarifies, however, that in order to become so involved with queer activism and the community, Walsh needed more than just the mythologised family legacy he had been dealt. He went on a journey which led to self-discovery regarding his queerness, a sort of pilgrimage, which roughly follows the pattern of how Marlaine C. Smith describes Joseph Campbell's notion of the traditional hero journey:

> Along the journey the hero is transformed from naïveté and innocence to deep experience and enlightenment. […] The journey begins when the hero separates self from the ordinary rhythms of life and enters a new territory undergoing a series of trials and confronting obstacles in order to achieve initiation into the unknown. Finally the hero returns to share self or what has been learned on the journey.[126]

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[124] Peter Crawley, "Review: I Am Tonie Walsh. What Is a Club DJ if Not a Keeper of Records?," in *The Irish Times,* November 29th, 2018. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/review-i-am-tonie-walsh-what-is-a-club-dj-if-not-a-keeper-of-records-1.3714660

[125] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 9.

[126] Marlaine C. Smith, "Health, Healing, and the Myth of the Hero Journey," *Advances in Nursing Science* 24, No 4 (2002): 4.

Tonie Walsh's journey to queer herodom starts with this separation from ordinary rhythms of life via a call to adventure. According to Smith, this call is usually an external force, a herald, but in *I Am Tonie Walsh* it seems to be a matter of personal will, an internal call:

> …like any self-respecting teenager I couldn't wait to get the fuck out of Clonmel and move to Dublin […]. I rocked up to UCD thinking it's going to be amazing - a hotbed of radicalism; only to discover it was a small, little village […]. So, at 19, I took myself off to Holland – as you do.[127]

Leaving for another, bigger town to explore one's identity is the first step on the hero journey, inherent to queer self-discovery and a path towards a stronger sense of self. In that sense, queer herodom is unique: the initial call to adventure is not selfless, but specifically aimed at the self and one's place in the world.

Smith notes that the next phase of the hero journey, the initiation, often involves the hero being reborn by acquiring a new path, new knowledge, for example through an encounter with the divine.[128] For Tonie Walsh, the queer hero, this knowledge was knowledge of his self. Amsterdam in that time adhered to Dutch laws around gay sex, which were much looser compared to Irish laws, which Walsh enthusiastically describes as his "ticket":[129] a ticket towards a freer sense of self. In Amsterdam, he experiences a sexual freedom he has not experienced before. He sees that there are other ways to be queer and express queerness, which liberates him not just sexually but on a broader level, setting him on a path towards self-discovery and self-acceptance. As he states:

> I arrived back to Dublin determined to deal with any residual conflict about my sexuality, especially after the fun of Amsterdam.[130]

In other words, during his hero's pilgrimage to another country and culture, he was initiated into queerness, initiated into his own identity. It is only after this that he is able to become politically active in service of the queer community. According to Smith, upon the hero's return they have been given access to a new sense of freedom, stemming "from the glimpse of the eternal that colours the vision of the world with the encouragement to live life from the

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[127] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 4.
[128] Smith, "Myth of the Hero Journey," 5.
[129] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 7.
[130] Ibid.

centre of one's truth".[131] Indeed, Walsh's quote above suggests a sense of determination to hold on to his newfound truth of identity, which he is then able to weaponize in aid of queer community building, a mindset which has prevailed to this day. As McMahon himself notes, "he's that kind of person, Tonie; he gives you a new perspective on the world and then makes you want to change it".[132] In that sense, the hero journey Walsh constructs is also taken as an inspirational myth for other queer individuals to follow in his footsteps.

Indeed, in *I Am Tonie Walsh,* Walsh himself stresses the importance of engaging new generations in political activism in service of the queer community:

> The young 'uns, because of the cultural and political choices they make and the environments they are mixing in have created smart platforms for new and urgent concerns. Leveraging their queerness. It's a powerful thing that also feeds into the type of communality that I always felt was a really important part of the political process. And the business of building a new republic. A generation super-engaged and angry […].[133]

In other words, mythological narratives such as *I Am Tonie Walsh* are important precisely because of their ability to engage a community. Walsh stresses the communal aspect of queerness, and how that can unite and politicise an otherwise fractured marginalised group. In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* Tonie Walsh is presented as a mythological hero who has the ability to relate such myths to queer individuals, with expert knowledge of and personal experience with Ireland's queer history. McMahon and Walsh narrate the origin story of a mythological figure who is alive and present to tell it himself. By allowing Walsh, as a queer individual, to mythify *himself,* the play contests any myths, symbols, and metaphors that may have otherwise been imposed on queerness and queer narratives, providing an authentic mythological basis for the queer community to build and grow from.

3.4 Mythological Heroes, Religion, and Saints

Richard Howells observes that the concept of heroism went through a religious shift in the Byzantine era, when Christian culture began to dominate and heroes were no longer conceptualised as soldiers and athletes, but saints.[134] This shift entailed a focus on a different kind of mythology: from the Greek pantheon of divinities which could boast a large variety of

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[131] Smith, "Myth of the Hero Journey," 6.
[132] McMahon, "Godfather of Gay Tells His Story."
[133] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 20.
[134] Richard Howells, "Heroes, Saints and Celebrities: the Photograph as Holy Relic," *Celebrity studies* 2, No 2 (2011): 117. DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2013.798544

human descendants who became heroes through their divine parentage and great deeds, to a Christian monotheism in which the single God had only a single descendant. Heroes, then, became those individuals who could claim a more enlightened connection to God through their sainthood without involving any ideas of direct descent. Like heroes, saints fulfil an exemplary function, as Andrew Michael Flescher notes:

> We can expect morally *extraordinary* people, such as heroes and saints, to do the very most they can to help whomever they can, owing to their extraordinarily courageous and loving natures. As such, according to the typical view, we ought to hold heroes and saints in our highest esteem without at the same time deluding ourselves into thinking we have the ability to do as they do. Heroes and saints are exceptional. They stand in relation to us as exemplary ideals.[135]

Saints, then, serve as examples of moral behaviour, and may influence the people who attempt to emulate them to do what is considered 'right'. By extension, their connection to God suggests that the morality this God imposes on His closest followers and representatives is truly good and should be adhered to. This extends to saints, but also to members of the clergy who are representatives of God's word and morality. However, these clerical heroes do not always, as Flescher puts it, "embody the ideal"[136] like saints and heroes should.

Due to the worship, the faith, and the trust people put in heroes and saints, they exert a great deal of power. In Ireland specifically, this religious power is still actively visible. As Ivana Bacik states, the Catholic Church has "maintained significant power in Ireland through its substitution for the state in the provision of social services, particularly in education".[137] Yet with this power also came its abuse. In 2001, an independent research study on child sexual abuse by the clergy was commissioned by the Bishops' Committee on Child Protection, part of the Irish Roman Catholic Church.[138] Findings showed that both clergy members and the general public only became aware of the frequent sexual child abuse at the hands of the clergy through media coverage of the matter.[139] That does not mean, however, that this abuse never occurred before social media outlets and websites managed to create awareness for a wide audience.

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[135] Andrew Michael Flescher, "Introduction: The Morally Ordinary and the Morally Extraordinary," in *Heroes, Saints, and Ordinary Morality* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003): 2.
[136] Howells, "Heroes, Saints and Celebrities," 5.
[137] Ivana Bacik, "The Politics of Sexual Difference: the Enduring Influence of the Catholic Church," in *Theory on Edge,* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013): 18.
[138] Helen Goode, Hannah M. McGee, and Ciaran A. O'Boyle. *Time to listen: Confronting child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in Ireland* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003): 1.
[139] Goode, McGee and O'Boyle, *Time to Listen,* 2.

Moira J. Maguire notes that "contemporary commentators often speak of child sexual abuse as if it has only been recently discovered,"[140] but goes on to explain that this is not at all the case, and in fact, child sexual abuse at the hands of church institutions in Ireland has been happening for quite a long time.[141] In other words, it is a prevailing issue, which is especially pertinent since the Catholic Church occupies such a significant position of power in Ireland. Clergy members, who should function as exemplary figures and even heroes to their communities, act in complete contrast to their position. Helen Goode, Hannah M. McGee and Ciaran A. O'Boyle note how abuse victims have either lost faith in the Catholic Church as an institution, or have even lost their faith altogether.[142] The consequences of such negatively subverted herodom are shown to be particularly significant to already vulnerable community members in Phillip McMahon's *Come On Home,* in which no hero-coded figure acts as they, according to the norms of sainthood and herodom in religious terms, should. These figures still exert the influence and enjoy the benefits of their status as saintly heroes, and may even perpetuate the myth that they are good and beneficial to their surroundings, but, consciously or unconsciously, they use that power poorly, and consequently harm their loved ones, and the community and its future.

3.5 Problematising the Hero: Religion and Power Abuse in *Come On Home*

Come On Home was first produced in 2018 at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The narrative takes place over the course of a single night and day and tells the story of Michael, who fled the little Irish town he grew up in twenty years ago because he could not live a safe and happy life as a gay man there, and now returns for the funeral of his mother. He is reunited with his brothers Ray and Brian and their respective partners. While his younger brother Ray is eventually pleased to see him, his girlfriend Aoife, who has become unexpectedly pregnant, seems to blame Michael for leaving. Michael's older brother Brian spends most of the first act making homophobic remarks and acting aggressively towards his returned brother, quietly supported by his wife Martina. Michael also meets with Father Aidan Cleary, with whom he attended a seminary before fleeing to London. In the second act, the narrative comes to a climax when it is revealed that Michael and Father Aidan are old lovers, and that Brian was sexually abused by a friar at his school, which partly explains his animosity towards Michael,

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[140] Moira J. Maguire, "The Carrigan Committtee and Child Sexual Abuse in Twentieth-century Ireland," *New Hibernia Review* 11, No 2 (2007): 79. https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2007.0023

[141] Maguire, "The Carrigan Committee," 79.

[142] Goode, McGee and O'Boyle, *Time to Listen,* 5.

whose initial intentions of becoming a priest and unexpected flight from town both emphasised the horror and inescapability of Brian's trauma. In the end, when all is revealed and discussed, everyone makes a first attempt at reconciliation, the three brothers reach a sense of peace and partial forgiveness, and Michael even confronts Father Aidan about his secrecy regarding his queerness. The play ends on a note of positivity about the possibility of a better future without forgetting the trauma of the past.

A central theme in *Come On Home* is the fact that authority figures, who should function as idols and heroes, such as fathers, teachers, and priests, use their power in an abusive or repressive way, which does not aid the community but deeply harms it instead. As Mick Heaney notes in a review of the production for *The Irish Times,* the play makes clear that "the church's one-time domination of society has an enduring half-life".[143] The influence of the clergy is a central theme in *Come On Home,* especially pertaining to ideas of herodom and sainthood. If heroes and saints, according to Flescher, serve as exemplary figures where ideology and moral behaviour is concerned,[144] then *Come On Home* subverts that idea and thus stresses the importance of beneficial heroes and idols for vulnerable groups, such as children, and especially queer children. This is conveyed through the way the three brothers, Michael, Brian and Ray, relate to the authority figures in their lives, namely their parents and the members of the clergy who are supposed to be their guides and teachers. All three brothers suffered from power abuse and poor influence in their own way, and have grown apart and changed greatly as a result, as the consequences of these negative influences still controls their lives.

Ray is the youngest of the three brothers, being 34, and seems the most optimistic, though it is difficult to figure out if his positive outlook reflects how he truly feels. Despite his more light-hearted tone, his ties to the authority figures in his life, even if they are dead, keep him stuck in a village which does not enable any discernible progress in his life. When Michael asks him how the barber shop is doing, which Ray inherited from their father, it becomes clear the business is failing:

RAY:

Two, three days in a row without a single soul wanting their hair cutting. It's heart-breaking.

MICHAEL:

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[143] Mick Heaney, "Come On Home: A Tale of Sexual Repression and Provincial Suffocation," in *The Irish Times,* July 18th, 2018. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/come-on-home-a-tale-of-sexual-repression-and-provincial-suffocation-1.3568894

[144] Flescher, "Introduction," 2.

Time to move on.
RAY:
Customers all dead or dying or… I don't know…
Beat.
MICHAEL:
What?
RAY:
It's just I promised the old man I'd keep it going.[145]

Even if their father is long dead, Ray is still unable to break free from his influence. His partner Aoife is pregnant, and she desperately wants to leave the village, but Ray's insistence on keeping his promise to his father keeps them stuck firmly in place. Andrew Michael Flescher states that we are attached to figures of heroes and saints because of their "potential to serve as mentors to those interested in living a virtuous life".[146] Ray, along this logic, considers his father a hero and in keeping his promise to keep his father's work going, he hopes to consequently lead a good and virtuous life. However, his father's ethos and worldview do not adequately meet Ray's needs, as it keeps him financially insecure and living in a village which offers little perspective for a better future, and as a result worsens his quality of life.

This posthumous negative authoritative influence is also apparent in his oldest brother Brian's relationship with their father. Brian is initially shown to specifically hold his mother in extraordinarily high regard. When he shows up at the house he incites friction and the threat of violence between himself and the others who are present - Michael, Aoife, Ray, and Martina - but kisses his dead mother on the head,[147] as if she is the only one who deserves his tenderness. Later, he likens her to an angel:

BRIAN:
Perfect she was. Perfect.
He kisses his mother's forehead.
BRIAN:
Am I right?
RAY:
No doubt about it.

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[145] Phillip McMahon, *Come On Home* (London: Oberon Books, 2018): 21.
[146] Flescher, "Introduction," 8.
[147] McMahon, *Come On Home* 57.

BRIAN:
An angel she was. *(To MICHAEL)* Am I right?
Pause.
MICHAEL:
She will be missed.
BRIAN:
Ah would ya go away. She'll be missed. Me fuckin' heart is tore out of me. She'll be missed. How am *I* supposed to live?[148]

Brian's desperation and his inability to imagine a future without his mother is more than just grief. Similar to his brothers, he has a complicated relationship with his parents and seems to imagine he has lost something fundamental which he needs to anchor himself to a specific path in life. This follows from the fact that as his mother, she was Brian's main caregiver. Of course, she was also Michael's and Ray's as well, but Michael seems to partially blame her for being forced to leave home, as will be elaborated on later, and Ray seems to prefer his father as a parental example. In other words, Brian, out of all three children, places his mother on the highest pedestal. Flescher states that through heroes and saints "we are able to see that a life of virtue entails (…) being compassionate in terms of desiring the betterment of others".[149] In his mother's parental care and perceived gentleness and kindness, Brian saw extraordinary virtuous qualities which in his eyes made his mother a saint and an angel.

However, his view of his mother strikes a sharp contrast to his partner Martina's view of her mother-in-law. Martina states that she was always subjected to verbal abuse by Brian's mother, who believed her to not be good enough for her son, and instead of praising her morals like Brian does, critiques her instead:

MARTINA:
Her devotion to your father, who was a pig. *Will Daddy have his tea? Will I light the fire for Daddy?* [...] Her morals. Lanterin' Jesus. I couldn't stand her moralising. Right and wrong, like she invented the idea. And the religion. You'd swear she'd go on a crucifix herself the way she went on.[150]

Where Brian sees his mother as the perfect woman, Martina has an outsider perspective, as she married into the family. She sees her mother-in-law's 'saint-like' morality as something false and hypocritical. Brian sees an angel, a connotation which ties in with the fact that his

[148] McMahon, *Come On Home*, 80.
[149] Flescher, "Introduction," 11.
[150] McMahon, *Come On Home*, 53.

mother equated ethical behaviour with religion, but Martina sees a complicated and flawed human woman.

Crucially, Martina is the one who took care of Brian's mother, who washed her when her illness prevents her from doing so and who was with her when she died, despite the strained relationship between the two women.[151] Brian, on the other hand, acts according to Flescher's notion that saints and heroes are figures who are believed to always go above and beyond and sacrifice themselves,[152] and thus allows himself to ignore his mother's very human need for help. This ties in with Shonagh Hill's observation that women's bodies are often used as mythological political terrain: "the idealised figure became the 'reality' that shaped and supplanted the material realities of women's lives".[153] By idealising women and the female body to mythologically represent goodness, care, and ideal womanhood, which are frequently tied to motherhood, the real wants and needs of these women are ignored and erased. The myth silences them. This is what Brian does, even though in his own view, his idealisation of his mother is not a bad thing. He worships her, and copies the behaviour which she believes to be ethical, which includes her devotion to his father. His father, however, is one of the key authority figures in the play who proclaims a regressive ideology which harms all three of his sons, and underlines how toxic use of a hero-coded authority position can perpetuate harmful ideals, especially concerning queerness.

A pivotal point in the play comes when Brian confesses his sexual assault at the hand of the Brothers who were supposed to be his teachers. Evidently, one of the things that hurt him most was his father's reaction. According to Julia A. Stevens, Anna H. Lathrop, and Cheri L. Bradish, Generation Y (of which Brian is a member), because of their predisposition for familial ties, identifies their parents as key hero figures, with the father as the favourite, either because of "pro-social descriptions [...], "personal trait", or "'because he's my Dad'".[154] Generations following Generation Y are more influenced by the presence of social media and the growing importance of the entertainment industry when looking for a hero to emulate. Social media influencers, for example, occupy a heroic position for many young people. In other words, children from Generation Y tend to look to their parents for a sense of direction regarding behaviour and ethics, and will copy their ideology. Brian exemplifies this - and thus also brights to light how painful this influence can truly be. When he gathers the courage to

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[151] McMahon, *Come On Home*, 53-54.
[152] Flescher, "Introduction," 9.
[153] Hill, "Introduction," 4.
[154] Julia A. Stevens, Anna H. Lathrop, & Cheri L. Bradish, "'Who is Your Hero?' Implications for Athlete Endorsement Strategies," *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 12, No 2 (2003): 107.

reveal the sexual assault at the hands of Brother McCarthy to his father, he hopes for support and comfort, but the opposite happens:

BRIAN
I did tell him. I had to. 'Cos I'd have threw meself in the river otherwise.
MICHAEL
But Daddy?
BRIAN:
Beyond believing. Somethin' like that. The shame I brought on this house. And then the batin' 'cos it was all we knew between us. Closed shop. Lights off. *Bam bam.*
Beat.
But he did believe me. I could tell. Because he only got harder on me then.[155]

Instead of helping his son, his father imposes guilt onto Brian, which leads him to direct his pain and frustration in a different direction: towards his brother Michael's sexuality.

Brian makes various homophobic comments towards Michael, which may first lead the audience to believe that Brian is simply ignorant. But when he confesses his childhood assault to his brothers, he accuses Michael of 'joining them'.[156] This has a double meaning: Michael joined the clergy to become a priest, but he also came out of the closet, which to Brian meant he joined the side of the abusive clergyman's sexual tendencies, even though Michael's sexuality had nothing to do with the clergy's paedophilia. Even if Brian does not consciously realise it, the regressive influence of the Brothers - who are supposed to be exemplary figures, embodiments of God's ethics, Christian saint-like people for the community - causes him to develop a warped sense of homophobia. As Kevin Ohi states, "in homophobic ideology, the molester and the queer register as analogous faults in a system of representation whose phantasmic coherence is upheld, in part, by the fetishization of childhood innocence".[157] Brian adheres to this point of view: to him, queerness equals sexual abuse, which leads to his homophobia. Additionally, Brian's father is also described to be a homophobe in a conversation between Martina and Michael:

MARTINA:
The most intolerant fucker I ever met in me life, he was. Did you expect him to change overnight? For you?[158]

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[155] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 90.
[156] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 91.
[157] Kevin Ohi, "Molestation 101: Child abuse, homophobia, and the boys of St. Vincent," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, No 2 (2000): 196.
[158] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 97.

The brothers' father, then, never gave them a good example in how to approach queerness with empathy and respect. Moreover, despite Brian's disappointment in his father's response to his assault, he still displays a great deal of reverence for him, and will have copied and internalised his father's ignorance towards what he considers 'deviating' sexualities. As Michael says to Brian: "You're your father's son alright".[159] This emulated behaviour pattern emphasises the importance of hero figures using their influence and platforms for good, since their status, according to Flescher, means they embody an ideal,[160] to which their ethical behaviour creates a moral imperative. In other words, what heroes and saints do is good, and thus should be accepted and copied as a factual example of morality. Brian's father's questionable morality, especially concerning queerness, also clearly negatively influences Michael and his search for his own identity.

Like his two brothers, Michael has a complicated relationship with both his parents. After he fled town, his mother evidently still kept in touch with him, even when he moved away to Dublin:

MICHAEL:

Mammy was different in Dublin. [...] She was a mystery to me. Grinning as the food disappeared past the wonky lipstick. *Don't tell Daddy,* she says to me this one time when she ordered a glass of something fizzy with her tea. *Don't tell Daddy.* [...] Then her sister died and the visits came further apart and sure by then I was furious at her, 'cos it was her keeping me away too. So I told her not to come anymore.[161]

On the one hand, his mother wanted to remain in contact with him, despite Michael's revelation about his sexuality. On the other hand, his father's influence is palpable even through his mother: she visits him in secret, without ever telling her husband, and Michael sees this inability to break free from his father's warped ethics as his mother also keeping him away from home. As Martina indicated, his mother practically worshipped her husband, despite his treatment of his own children, and she would in all likelihood not stand up to him, even if she could see what he was doing was wrong.

Michael's father is the one who kicked him out of his house when Michael came out of the closet. Because Michael, like his brothers, saw his father as a hero figure in his life, this behaviour came as a terrible shock:

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[159] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 60.
[160] Flescher, "Introduction," 5.
[161] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 39.

RAY:
He was a dinosaur. What did you expect from him?
MICHAEL:
Not 'get out' anyway. I don't know. Practise what he preached; Compassion, understanding.[162]

His father, then, often expressed moralising sentiments, but when it came to putting this into practice, he regressed to his true internalised ethics, causing him to throw his son out of his own home. This plays into the duality that Flescher notes concerning heroes and saints, and morality: heroes and saints can be held to higher standards because they transgress the human experience, but when 'regular' humans try to follow in their footsteps, they tend to fail, since they cannot, like heroes and saints, be held "accountable to an unreasonably demanding standard of moral requirement".[163] Michael's mistake in putting his father on a pedestal, then, is not keeping the inherent flaws of his humanity into account. That is not to say this excuses Michael's father from his regressive ethics; yet it does explain why it comes as such a blow for Michael when his father fails to live up to the heroic and saint-like standards which he himself set.

To make matters more complicated, Michael confesses he joined the seminary to become a priest to make his father happy.[164] Even after he has been forcefully removed from his own home by his father, he seems to long for some redemption, a reckoning, which he can only confess to his dead mother:

MICHAEL:
Only in my fantasy, you're not this *thing.* You're moving about. Giving out and serving up tea and running that *fucking* cloth across every surface. And Daddy's in the shop then. *Is that our Mikey?*, he says. And you're giving out about hair on the carpet, but Daddy doesn't care 'cos he's delighted to see me.[165]

As a queer youth, what Michael needed from his father when he came out of the closet was understanding and compassion, but he received the opposite. Even years later, he still longs for that. This underlines how deep the scars of an abusive or toxic authority figure run, and still influence the victims decades later. Only in his fantasy can Michael finally receive what

[162] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 77.
[163] Flescher, "Introduction," 8.
[164] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 77.
[165] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 102.

he wanted and needed so badly all these years. Both Martina and Ray seem to be confused as to why Michael expected better from his father, but Michael saw his father as a hero, a saint, and as Flescher observes, we tend to think that heroes and saints will go above and beyond their moral duty without question or complaint.[166] When Michael's father acts in the complete opposite way, Michael, for the first time, sees the flaws in his father and his ethics, and is thus robbed of a hero-coded authority figure whose guidance he may have wished for in the search for his own queer identity.

In *Come On Home,* all authority figures who could function as heroes or saints are shown to be anything but exemplary. Instead, they are revealed to be humans who make mistakes, who are abusive, and who misuse the power and influence they wield as figures who especially young people tend to look up to. Being a hero or a saint, as Alfred Archer notes, involves sacrifice, "a cost to the agent performing the act".[167] Yet all problematised authority figures in *Come On Home* are unwilling to sacrifice what is necessary in order to be a true hero or saint, be it their old worldviews, the perks they enjoy in their position of power, or their relationship with their significant other. Thus, *Come On Home* sharply reveals how this misused sainthood or herodom has terrible consequences for the people who are subjected to this negative influence, causing regressive worldviews to be implemented and adhered to even decades later. This is especially pertinent for Michael, the only queer character in the play, who has been robbed of a chance to discover his own queer identity freely and joyfully, and has instead been removed from his home. In other words, *Come On Home* emphasises the importance of proper heroes for queer youths, especially when they, like Michael, have no alternative to look to when their own heroes fail them.

3.6 Imposed Myths: The Danger of Victimhood

Come On Home problematises the idea of heroism by addressing the toxicity of authority figures in religious contexts, and showing how queer individuals need heroes from their own community to serve as positive influences. In that vein, *I Am Tonie Walsh* shows how powerful mythified queer hero narratives can be if they are written by and in service of the community. However, mainstream culture also participates in the creation of queer myths, and may impose myths on the queer community over which the mythified queer individuals have no control. Julie Reid observes that "myths can also be harmful if their signified

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[166] Flescher, "Introduction," 9.

[167] Alfred Archer, "Saints, heroes and Moral Necessity," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 77 (2015): 108. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246115000223

(second-order sign) is high in negative and fictional content".[168] Indeed, if the queer individual is mythified by outside forces and does not have any autonomy in their signified connotations, these myths may be harmful or derogatory. Consider, for example, the mythification of gay bodies during the AIDS crisis. As Dion Kagan notes, "AIDS and gayness were once tangled in an inextricable metaphorical embrace",[169] linking the very existence of a queer body to connotations of sickness, death, and non-normative, deviant sexuality. As Shonagh Hill observes, "bodies bear the consequences of myths";[170] queer individuals embody the myths that are imposed on them, relegated to what their bodies are claimed to represent, and erasing all nuances and intricacies of the queer identity residing in that body. The Queer becomes a horror, a cautionary tale.

However, even if imposed myths attempt to place queer individuals in a more positive light, such a lack of autonomy runs the risk of mythified icons functioning in service of an ideology which does not necessarily apply to the queer community. As Kagan points out, "though a campaign for prideful representation is understandable given the dominance of homophobia in western media culture throughout modernity, the conventions that have become the mainstay of the positive images agenda – smiling faces, happy endings and stories of success – don't always reflect the material realities of queer lives".[171] Although the queer community is also 'guilty' of producing such positive images, Ed Madden points to the fact that mainstream culture has the most power in the mythmaking process and the imposition of myths on marginalised communities, naming the example of how gay men in Ireland became a symbol of the nation's prideful progress during the Celtic Tiger era.[172] This, at first glance, may seem like a positive development, but it silenced the still prevalent problems, issues and needs within the queer community. Consequently, Hill stresses the importance of repositioning members of a marginalised group as "icon makers"[173], the ones who have agency in the mythmaking process, and may mythify themselves and their peers.

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[168] Julie Reid, "Mythological Representation in Popular Culture Today," *Communicatio* 33, No 2 (2007): 95. DOI: 10.1080/02500160701685425

[169] Dion Kagan, "Introduction," in *Positive Images: Gay Men and HIV/AIDS in the Culture of Post-Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022): 11.

[170] Hill, "Introduction," 3.

[171] Kagan, "Introduction," 12.

[172] Madden, "Queering, Querying Irish Studies," 250.

[173] Hill, "Introduction," 3.

Eric Knee and Austin R. Anderson have observed that "discussions of queerness must be centered in either oppression or action",[174] and that this can create a harmful dichotomy which leaves little room for nuance or a political conversation between oppression and action. Indeed, this enables the notion that queer individuals are painted either as activists, or victims without agency. This latter notion especially can create a predetermined assumption of suffering being associated with queerness, without the queer individual in question being able – or indeed, being expected – to do anything about their lot. Daniel Marshall, in his discussion of the victimhood of queer youths in popular culture, has noted that "an effect of the reliance on the victim trope has been to actively undermine or de-emphasize queer youth agency by universalizing understandings of the queer youth as a subject who needs to be saved by external (often institutional and adult) agents".[175] Victimhood, then, is a slippery slope towards a loss of agency. Indeed, when death follows this period of suffering, the queer victim may, in the mythifying hands of external forces, become a passive martyr who has had no part in their own symbolisation. In *Once Before I Go*, Phillip McMahon actively contests this tendency and underlines the importance of in-community queer mythification.

3.7 Contesting Passive Martyrdom in *Once Before I Go*

Once Before I Go charts the friendship between Lynn, her brother Bernard, and their mutual friend and Bernard's eventual boyfriend Daithí, spanning four decades through three narrative strands, set in 1987, 1991, and 2019, respectively. In 1987, the narrative takes place in Dublin and shows the beginning of Bernard and Daithí's relationship, and how the three friends navigate their queer lives in a country racked by the AIDS crisis in which they do not feel safe or accepted. Lynn decides to leave for London, where she hopes she can explore her lesbian identity more freely. In 1991, the narrative shifts to Paris, where Bernard and Daithí live together as a couple. Despite their obvious bliss at this situation, it is soon revealed that Bernard is dying as a result of AIDS, though he seems intent to live his life to the fullest to the very end. He makes Daithí promise not to come to his funeral, even if it will severely upset Lynn. In 2019, the results of this upset are clear: there is a rift between Lynn and Daithí. Daithí lives in London with Jase, a young transgender man who he is helping with both substance abuse and navigating his own queerness in a changed world. When Lynn visits with

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[174] Eric Knee, and Austin R. Anderson, "Queer Politics, the Gay Bar, and Hapless Victimhood During COVID-19: A Brief Response to Burns (2021) Queerness as/and Political Attunement," *Leisure Sciences* (2021): 3. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2021.1919254

[175] Daniel Marshall, "Popular Culture, the 'Victim' Trope and Queer Youth Analytics," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, No 1 (2010): 65. DOI: 10.1080/09518390903447176

an urn full of Bernard's ashes, the two finally talk about what transpired all those years ago, and eventually come together in a moment of forgiveness and healing, during which they dance through Bernard's scattered ashes and glitter.

Although *Once Before I Go* focuses on the personal relationships and dynamics between its three main characters, the AIDS crisis also plays a vital part in the narrative. McMahon himself, in an interview with *The Irish Times*, has noted:

"The play is asking: are gay people alright? I think Irish society has, in a way, put a full stop on gay people. We voted in marriage equality and that was it. The country has yet to come to terms with its Aids crisis, to reconcile with it. All that legacy and trauma, where does that go?"[176]

The play, then, attempts to provide the reconciliation which McMahon has found lacking in contemporary Ireland. Yet despite this heavy subject matter, the production is at times also light-hearted, veering from tragic to comedic and back again. McMahon states that he did not want the show to be preachy, but rather be "large scale celebration of queer life".[177] In other words, *Once Before I Go* tells a suppressed tragic history, but uses this reframing to celebrate queerness and the community which still feels the impact of Ireland's treatment of the AIDS crisis today. This comes to the fore especially through the play's treatment of Bernard, the only character in the play to die of AIDS. In *Once Before I Go,* Bernard is not a passive victim who becomes a martyr, but a real, vivid person whose life and existence is mythical in its beauty and impact, and who, after his death, serves as a queer guardian angel who inspires and influences the queer lives of the people he touched, even if it is on a small scale.

The audience is first introduced to Bernard through Daithí and Lynn's descriptions of him. As the play starts in 2019, Bernard has passed away already at that point, but his influence is still palpable and a reason for tension between the remaining friends. If Bernard can be interpreted as a mythological figure, at least to those closest to him, then Lynn and Daithí both have different interpretations of and attitudes towards that presence in their lives:

LYNN:
I think about him every day.
Beat
LYNN:

[176] Chris McCormack, "Hidden Wounds and Secret Histories," in *The Irish Times,* 18 September 2021.
[177] Aoife Moriarty, "Dublin Playwright Phillip McMahon on Once Before I Go, His New Show Confronting the legacy of Ireland's Aids Crisis," in *BUZZ,* 26 September 2021. https://www.buzz.ie/culture/dublin-playwright-phillip-mcmahon-once-25065481

Do you?
DAITHI:
No. I set him free a long time ago. I had to.[178]

To Lynn, then, Bernard is still very much a tangible presence in her life, and remembrance is something that is important and necessary to her. Daithí, on the other hand, talks about 'setting him free'; to him, remembrance is a burden, and knowing he was with Bernard to the very end is enough. These are two very different reactions to loss, and different modes of grieving. This, along with the fact that Daithí, upon Bernard's request, did not attend the funeral, causes a deep rift between Daithí and Lynn, who, at the beginning of the play, have not spoken in a very long time because of Bernard's passing.

As a result, both of them actively avoid discussing Bernard. Although his lingering presence is clear, this is, in the beginning of the play, not necessarily a positive situation. Daithí does not even seem to be able to say his name:

DAITHI:
After your brother died.
LYNN:
Bernard. Say his name for Christ's sake.
DAITHI is suddenly enraged.
DAITHI:
Don't tell me who or what I should say or feel. Bernard. Fucking Bernard. Bernard. *I* loved him. *I* loved him. *I* loved him.[179]

Daithí finally being able to say Bernard's name, here, allows the topic to be addressed. Before this, only Lynn has said her brother's name, which in the script's stage directions is described as something which "hangs in the air".[180] According to Alexandra A. Kim-Maoloney et al., "functions of proper names in mythology are broader than just singling something or someone out and could be identified as informational, semantic, descriptive, and categorical".[181] Mythological names are not just names, then. Bernard's name, indeed, seems to mean something more than just the fact of his name: it is his life, his influence, and the love and

[178] Phillip McMahon, *Once Before I Go* (London: Methuen Drama, 2021): 25.
[179] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 22.
[180] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 16.
[181] Alexandra A. Kim-Maloney, Antonina Kim, and Anna Tereschenko, "Informational field of proper names in mythology and folklore," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 154 (2014): 97.

legacy he left behind. Lynn even named her firstborn after Bernard - Bernadette, her daughter, who is according to Lynn "proud to carry her uncle's name".[182] By carrying on his name, perhaps his legacy can be carried on into the future as well. Additionally, by naming her child after Bernard, Lynn ties his name and all its connotations to something positive: life and potential, instead of sickness and death, which is especially pertinent when taking into account Richard Piorier's observation on the presence of an unjust symbolic connection between sexual depravity and AIDS.[183] When Lynn names her child after her brother, she counteracts these negative connotations, and the mythology of Bernard's life is passed on to a new generation, even if that generation is, in Lynn's words when she describes her children, "achingly straight and heartbreakingly beige".[184]

When the audience first sees Bernard on stage, then, all he is and will be has been set up by the first part of the play. His entrance is met with energy, with conflict, friction, humour, and sets into motion the rapid-paced flow of the rest of the act:

BERNARD enters. His face is bloody. He's been punched in the nose and beaten up.
BERNARD:
Ta-dah!
LYNN:
(*without missing a beat*) You told them then?
DAITHI:
What the hell?[185]

Bernard's state, here, clearly indicates he has been subjected to violence, yet his own matter-of-fact reaction, presenting himself almost like a performer would in seeking applause, immediately emphasises his own rejection of victimhood. Lynn's question refers to the fact that Bernard came out to his parents - she is not surprised at their apparently violent reaction, and even expected it. Only Daithí is shocked, but his suggestion to contact the police is met with light-hearted mockery and jokes,[186] which allows Bernard to be a symbol of strength and perseverance without making light of what happened to him. Later on, Bernard does admit his father beat him up, which, according to the stage directions, causes a shift in the mood.[187] Yet

[182] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 18.
[183] Richard Poirier, "AIDS and traditions of Homophobia," *Social Research* 55, No 3 (1988): 462.
[184] Ibid.
[185] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 40.
[186] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 41.
[187] Ibid.

it is Bernard who decides when the violence he has been subjected to is allowed to become something serious, by taking complete control over the narrative from the moment he steps through the door.

It is exactly this agency and narrative control which both allows Bernard to never slip into a passive victim role, and to become a larger-than-life character to his friends and chosen family, even posthumously. His immediate rejection of martyrdom, or passively symbolising the tragedy of violence against gay men, ties in with Shonagh Hill's insistence on the importance of a shift "from bearing to creating and controlling meaning".[188] The process of myth-making, and indeed mythifying the self, then, creates room for agency, but it is always an active process, counteracting what Hill terms "inherited myths",[189] which perpetuate old-fashioned ideologies and ideas and leave little room for queerness to exist and expand. Yet from the moment he physically enters, Bernard is insistent on creating this room for himself:

DAITHI:
Let him learn the hard way.
BERNARD:
And what will I learn, *David*? To quieten myself down? To make myself smaller? I've *been* beaten up. Today, as it happens. And tonight, rather than feel sorry for myself, I've picked myself up and put a face on and squeezed myself into two pairs of tights and a set of heels that are three sizes too small for me, because I am *fierce.* And the gay police here – or whatever it is you think you are – won't tell me what to do. And the religious nut jobs at home won't tell me what to do. And the queer bashers out there can take their fuckin' chances cos' I've got a knife in me knickers and I'm good to use it.
DAITHI:
Take a breath, will ya?
BERNARD:
I won't be told. End of. And I won't shut up or dress down for you or for anyone. I refuse to make myself invisible.[190]

Whilst giving this speech, Bernard is dressed up in what the stage directions describe as "DIY drag at its most basic".[191] He has put his own queer identity on display proudly, prominently, and fearlessly, despite Daithí's very realistic fear that he may be subjected to abuse because of the way he is dressed. He thus displays a self-love and self-acceptance both physically and

[188] Hill, "Introduction," 8.
[189] Hill, "Introduction," 1.
[190] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 48-49.
[191] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 45.

verbally. Although he later does say that he is "a young homosexual discovering his voice",[192] Bernard's entrance and joyful presentation indicates he is in the process of manifesting the myth of who he is and what he stands for. As Julie Reid explains, "myths may operate as the foot-soldiers of ideologies",[193] and Bernard's ideologies are steeped in self-love, pride, and joyfulness, even if the situation for queer people was largely hostile in 1987. The influence of this ideological self-mythification is made clear most prominently through Bernard's relationship with Daithí.

Daithí and Bernard are opposites in many ways. In fact, Daithí admits to Lynn he does not like Bernard very much, saying that "there's just *something* about that lad that grinds my gears".[194] Daithí is unable to bring to words what, exactly, vexes him so much, but the following interactions with Bernard suggest that he is mostly annoyed with Bernard's flamboyant presentation, which to Daithí indicates that Bernard refuses to take the dangers of being queer in their environment seriously, as underlined by Daithí's reaction above, posing that Bernard will learn "the hard way". Daithí is serious and reserved where Bernard is playful and extravagant, which immediately causes friction between the two:

DAITHI:
You could do with being more political.
BERNARD:
Look at me. I'm about to mince down Grafton Street like this. It don't get any more political.
DAITHI scoffs.
BERNARD:
You can paint your placard 'til the cows come home, but until you have marched through this town in five-inch heels and fishnets, you will never know what it is to truly be a faggot on the front line.[195]

Bernard here explains that he has a different way of being political, and a different way of expressing his queer identity, which is a stark contrast to Daithí, who is more formally political, participating in marches and going to meetings, but otherwise being careful and held back. For example, Daithí is refraining from sexual activity due to the frightening situation of the AIDS crisis, but Bernard is doing no such thing. The queer ideologies which Bernard seeks to represent push against Daithí's own worldview. As Reid explains, "a myth only gains

[192] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 52.
[193] Reid, "Mythological Representation," 82.
[194] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 42.
[195] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 47.

meaning in its representation",[196] and it may take time before a myth is accepted as truth since it only becomes naturalised through repetition through an accessible medium. To Daithí, the queer mythology of Bernard is new and has not yet become 'naturalised' to him, but the play shows that over time, Bernard influences Daithí to such a large degree that his world is changed, and Bernard becomes an irreplaceable part of Daithí's personal mythology.

Bernard's myth-sized influence becomes clear in the act of the production that takes place in Paris, in 1991. In 1987, Bernard already indicated he had "his sights set on Paris",[197] and, true to himself, he followed his dreams - but not alone. Bernard and Daithí live there together, as a couple. Although at this point Bernard is quite ill, and the act is slightly slower and more meditative, Bernard is still the most lively character on stage. Where Dion Kagan noted the aforementioned "inextricable metaphorical embrace"[198] of AIDS and gay men, or in fact gay bodies, Bernard rejects this symbolism and actively embodies a different myth: the myth of his own character, the myth of his queer self. As Shonagh Hill observed, the stage is an ideal site for contesting and reframing mythologies, as they are literally embodied by the performers, who utilise that embodiment to reveal the performativity of myth and identity, and thus write old mythologies anew.[199] Bernard's queer body, in this act, becomes a site of political and symbolical revision. Although the play makes no attempt to hide the fact that Bernard is physically quite ill, it is never allowed to be a cause for victim-driven pity:

BERNARD slips his dress off. His body is covered in Kaposi Sarcoma lesions caused by AIDS.
DAITHI:
Let me look at you.
BERNARD:
Why?
DAITHI:
Because you are beautiful.[200]

Daithí's reaction, and Bernard's persistent flamboyant and joyful personality, counteract the connotations of martyrdom and death that may be connected to a queer body suffering from AIDS. Despite his illness, and the physical proof of it, Bernard is no less beautiful and no less

[196] Reid, "Mythological Representation," 83.
[197] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 54.
[198] Dion Kagan, "Introduction," in *Positive Images: Gay Men and HIV/AIDS in the Culture of Post-Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022): 11.
[199] Hill, "Introduction," 3.
[200] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 73.

lively. He embodies his self-actualised mythological persona, and seems intent on doing so until the end.

Hill's notion of embodied mythmaking, in the end, comes down to a reclaimed agency of a regressive narrative. This is what Bernard insists on as well. From the moment he came out, he has been in complete control of his presentation, his identity, and what he intends to represent. His illness at no point causes him to falter:

BERNARD:
I want to die on my terms. Listen to me. My terms. My terms. And with dignity. [...]
Beat.
I just want a say in what happens to me.
Beat.
I demand it.[201]

Bernard shows a sharp understanding that AIDS often tears narrative control away from those queer individuals who are suffering from it. Yet his words here underline his active resistance to being made into a symbol by another, to external myth-making. In a review for *The Irish Times*, Sara Keating notes that "Bernard chooses his own transformational encore".[202] Indeed, Bernard frequently and insistently treats himself like a fictional, mythical character. As Hill notes, "myth and gendered identity are performative as both depend upon repetition to achieve force that perpetuates its meanings".[203] Through Bernard's repeated behaviour, and by performing his curated self, his myth of self is accepted and adhered to by his direct surroundings.

Because Bernard repeats his self-actualising behaviour by never letting go of who he is and what he wants to be and represent, he shows an acute awareness of the performative nature of his character. This awareness seems to surpass the narrative, as if Bernard is aware his life will be narrated, and that he will leave an influence and a legacy behind:

BERNARD:
Promise me you won't look at me dead. Promise me you'll only remember me as I was tonight. Tripping through Paris, half pissed, looking fabulous and just being very very alive.

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[201] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 85.
[202] Sara Keating, Once Before I Go: Join the Dance, Live Fully, Live Without Judgment, Live Well," in *The Irish Times*, October 4th, 2021. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/once-before-i-go-join-the-dance-live-fully-live-without-judgment-live-well-1.4690587
[203] Hill, "Introduction," 15-16.

Beat. The air is thick with love.

DAITHI:

I promise.

BERNARD:

I am determined to explode out of this world like a gorgeous firework. My worst nightmare is that I'll be left to fizzle out.[204]

Bernard makes decisions for both Lynn and Daithí in how they may approach his death, funeral, and mourning. This is both a result of his stable grasp on narrative agency, and a sharp knowledge of what both of them need when he passes on. He does not want to be seen as someone who is sick, dying, or a victim, but wants his image and memory to remain intact and as he curated them. Dan Todman notes that "'myth' is often juxtaposed with 'reality' and used as a synonym for 'lie'",[205] but, additionally, contests this notion: he observes that myths are often used to explain reality, for example past events,[206] and used as a rationalising framework to make sense of something which seems out of reach or incomprehensible. Along those lines, Bernard ensures that his mythified self is grounded in reality, and in real connections with the people around him: his auto-mythification ensures that he will have a legacy, be remembered, and never be truly out of reach. He becomes what Christopher Flood calls a "sacred truth",[207] someone divine or semi-divine who serves a guardian spirit for a specific cultural group who adheres to the mythological figure's truth.

Indeed, Bernard's death does not end his existence. Even when he is not physically there in 2019, his presence is felt. It is vital, then, that Bernard's influence is only effective when Lynn and Daithí are finally able to talk about him and reconcile, making peace with each other and the past. As Susan Sellers notes, paraphrasing Carl Jung, mythologies "only become accessible through projection and telling".[208] Indeed, Lynn and Daithí only gain access to the mythology of Bernard's life and legacy by talking about him together. When they finally do, and scatter his ashes (and glitter), they continue referring to him as if he is somehow still present, even posthumously:

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[204] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 88.

[205] Dan Todman, "Introduction," in *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): XIII

[206] Ibid.

[207] Christopher Flood, "Myth and Ideology," in *Thinking Through Myths*, edited by Kevin Schilbrack (London: Routledge, 2002): 176.

[208] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 5-6.

LYNN:

This is weird, but there's a little bit of Bernard left in here. I was thinking we could scatter him in the Irish sea along the way.

Beat. DAITHI has a mischievous idea.

DAITHI:

No. Let's take him to Ireland with us. That would really wind him up.[209]

Their reconciliation allows Bernard's memory and mythologised persona to become a part of their lived experience and worldview again. Daithí's "mischievous" decision, in fact, emulates Bernard's character: Bernard himself states that he has made the previously serious and reserved Daithí "a lot more fun".[210] Additionally, Daithí insists that Bernard and his love have saved him, "over and over again".[211] Bernard, then, becomes a hero, an icon, and a guardian, at least to the people closest to him who have been touched by his presence. Susan Sellers emphasises the necessity of such mythological, divine presences for marginalised communities, as they are a source of positive, progressive inspiration.[212]

In *Once Before I Go,* then, the character of Bernard consciously and flamboyantly counteracts stereotypes and empty representations of queer bodies suffering from AIDS. As Daniel Marshall states, queer victimhood often leads to a lack of narrative agency,[213] but Bernard opposes that impulse in every way. His stance enables him to be mythified. He expresses himself in a way that does not suggest there is only one 'right' way to be queer, but in a way that shows that self-acceptance, pride, and joy are key parts of what makes queerness so beautifully unique, and in a way that inspires not just the people he is closest to, but also others who see him. As Bernard himself says in response to Daithí's remark that almost everyone at a party in Paris was obsessed with him: "they're only human".[214] This suggests that he has surpassed that human quality and become something altogether more mystical - and mythical. Bernard is always aware of and in charge of his own mythified narrative. Consequently, he, as a myth, functions in service of the queer community of which he is a part, rather than in service of mainstream culture which uses queer bodies as symbols when needed.

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[209] McMahon, *Once Before I Go,* 93.
[210] McMahon, *Once Before I Go,* 81.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Sellers, "Becoming Gods and Umbilical Wordbows," 65.
[213] Daniel Marshall, "Popular Culture, the 'Victim' Trope and Queer Youth Analytics," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, No 1 (2010): 65. DOI: 10.1080/09518390903447176
[214] McMahon, *Once Before I Go,* 67.

4 Queer Myths of Place

4.1 Chapter Outline

Mythological places exist in a variety of cultures and religions. Some examples include the Greek gods' residence on Olympus, Atlantis, the Aztecs' Aztlan and Chicomoztoc, the Spanish conquistadors' El Dorado, Norse mythology's Asgard, the Arthurian legends' Avalon, Shangri-La from James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, but also more contemporary fictional mythological places that have been integrated into the public consciousness through popular culture, such as Narnia or Middle Earth. As Theresa Bane notes in her encyclopaedia of mythological places, it is not necessary "to believe the locations mentioned here are real or to have any faith whatsoever in the locale's corresponding religion. […] For the sake of reading more about a religion to understand its people, faith is not a requirement; rather understanding the how and why of the necessity of these places".[215] In other words, even if mythological places are understood to be fictional, the meaning attributed to these places is still very real. Myths of place come into existence for a reason, whether that be a communicative misunderstanding (El Dorado), the popularity of a fictional story (Middle Earth), or a more culturally significant, spiritual meaning. This chapter will discuss the latter, the spiritual meaning of mythological places in *I Am Tonie Walsh, Come On Home,* and *Once Before I Go,* with a specific focus on the idea of mythological safe spaces for the queer community.

This chapter will first briefly recapitulate the theory on queer safe spaces which has been discussed in chapter 2, and apply it to the idea of urban spaces and large cities as mythological safe havens for queer people, especially young queer people. Those observations will then be applied to McMahon's plays to analyse how the concept of urban safe spaces is both established and problematised in the texts. In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* big cities such as Dublin and London are established as critical destinations for queer young people to visit in order to discover themselves. In *Come On Home,* however, London is described with slightly more nuance: even if queer young people move there to flee the homophobia rampant in their small rural villages, the big city is not all it is promised to be. In *Once Before I Go,* several urban queer spaces are first mythologised and then humanised, as the characters who move there discover both the positives and the negatives of a queer life there. Additionally, in

[215] Theresa Bane, "Introduction," in *Encyclopedia of Imaginary and Mythical Places* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014): 8.

all three plays, real physical safe spaces *within* the urban safe spaces are referred to as if part of an Irish queer canon known to all members of the community, such as the club Flikkers and community centres. As places which are important to the Irish queer community in real life, the inclusion of these places in McMahon's plays both serves to legitimise their authentic queerness, and is important to the mythologisation of queer spaces for Irish history, as a form of archiving what may have otherwise been forgotten.

4.2 Queer Safe Spaces: The Promise of the Big City

Kian Goh states that "to many, the city - more accurately urban life - presents a normative ideal, the potential of difference without exclusion, or living together".[216] In other words, the city, and urban spaces, carry within them the promise of a better life. Goh goes on to explain that "cities have been considered places of relative safety for those confronting institutionalised violence".[217] Thus, marginalised communities will expect to find protection from what lies outside of the urban spaces they move to: prejudice, misunderstanding, and perhaps even violence. The queer community is no exception in this respect. According to Andrew Gorman-Murray, "queer sexualities often appear 'out of place' in communities of origin, and are frequently only enabled by relocation elsewhere".[218] Although choosing to relocate, or 'queer migration', may be motivated by a number of factors, Gorman-Murray does note that for "many queer migrants the quest for self-understanding and self-identity figure in the decision to migrate and the choice of destination".[219] It makes sense, then, that many queer people who live in rural areas will choose to move to bigger cities, as those are framed as being more open-minded and welcoming, and even the ideal space to start the journey of self-discovery that Gorman-Murray described.

However, Gorman-Murray also observes how reducing the idea of queer migration to the norm of rural-to-urban removes nuance from the whole process: migration also occurs within rural and urban spaces, not just between them, and "the normalisation of rural-to-urban movement is also theoretically problematic, intimating a once-and-for-all emergence from the rural 'closet', and hence presenting as teleological and ontologically final".[220] Still, rural-to-

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[216] Kian Goh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces: The urban politics of Radical LGBT Activism," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108, No 2 (2018): 464. DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2017.1392286
[217] Ibid.
[218] Andrew Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration Through the Body," in *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, No 1 (2007): 105. DOI: 10.1080/14649360701251858
[219] Ibid.
[220] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 106.

urban queer migration remains a popular concept, and *I Am Tonie Walsh*, *Come On Home* and *Once Before I Go* all feature this migration as a narrative beat, though some more centrally than others. That is not to say these narrative structures should be disregarded altogether. Gorman-Murray proposes a more *symbolic* function of the rural-to-urban move, which serves a central element of many coming-out stories.[221] This coincides with Goh's conceptualisation of the promise of the big city, and how urban spaces inherently symbolise progressive change and possibility.[222] Queer people, and especially young queer people, who live in rural spaces, may also believe the popular narrative that rural-to-urban migration leads to self-discovery and acceptance.

Gorman-Murray states that the focus should not be on the rural-to-urban move, however, but on the process of moving as a whole:

> We need to 'downsize' the scale of explanation from the regional or the national to the body. In doing this, we need to keep our sights on sexuality itself as a key motivating factor, which should enable us to recognize diverse paths of migration without privileging one trajectory at the expense of others. To this end, I propose that queer migration should be understood as *an embodied search for sexual identity*—an *individual search* which can be *materialised at differing, multiple scales and paths of relocation.*[223]

In other words, the process of a moving queer body symbolises a search for identity. Relocation, then, triggers change, not only geographically, but spiritually and emotionally as well. The fact that the rural-to-urban narrative is such a central conceptualisation of this change is an effect of historical normalisation of this story. Phillip McMahon's three plays feature several relocations, all indicating change and identity shifts, and show with care and nuance how the mythification of queer migration may not always be realistic, but necessary for queer identity and community formation.

4.3 Myths of Urban Queer Safety Reframed

As discussed above, Phillip McMahon and Tonie Walsh's *I Am Tonie Walsh* roughly follows the narrative structure of a classic hero journey. Marlaine C. Smith explains how on a hero journey, "the hero is consumed, swallowed up by the unknown, to be born anew".[224] A

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[221] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migratio," 108.
[222] Goh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces," 464.
[223] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 111.
[224] Marlaine C. Smith, "Health, Healing, and the Myth of the Hero Journey," *Advances in Nursing Science* 24, No 4 (2002): 5.

spiritual change is then inherent to this process. In that sense, it stands to reason that the destination would be critical to this change. However, when Smith describes the three stages of the hero journey, the destination is not one of them: there is the departure, motivated by a call to adventure; there is the initiation, during which the hero undergoes a series of trials; and there is the return, when the hero may choose to go back home.[225] It is the process of leaving and moving with the intent to change or discover new things which causes the hero journey to be such a transformative experience: not the *where,* but the *what* and *how*. This coincides with Gorman-Murray's theorisation of queer migration: it is a search for a queer home, which is "often informed by a yearning to discover, explore and enact sexual identities and desires".[226] Yet there is no one final destination which offers the queer migrant or even queer hero all they have been seeking. The move itself is transformative, as the change allows for new conceptualisations of the hero's own identity.

In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* Tonie Walsh relates having lived in a number of places. As mentioned above, he moved to Dublin, escaping a smaller town (Clonmel) with limited opportunities for queer identity exploration. In his own words, he "couldn't wait to get the fuck out".[227] This move seems to exemplify Gorman-Murray's conceptualisation of the traditional rural-to-urban move, a unidirectional move during which "physical movement of the body and change in identity is simultaneously accomplished, achieved in one act of relocation".[228] Yet Walsh's narrative reframes this myth of the urban queer mecca: when he arrived in Dublin, he states it was "a small, little village, full of boggers like myself"[229] and left for Amsterdam, another large urban space, with another set of promises inherent to the myth of the location. Indeed, Amsterdam was transformative as a mythical location on a hero journey can be:

> I was earning wedges of cash and choo-chooing up to Amsterdam at the weekends. Imagine the lure of Amsterdam to a nineteen-year-old Irishman. With Dutch permissiveness around sex, particularly homo-sex: this was my ticket![230]

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[225] Smith, "The Myth of the Hero Journey," 4-6.
[226] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 111.
[227] Phillip McMahon and Tonie Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* script received from McMahon via email on September 29th, 2022, Third Draft (October 4th, 2018): 4.
[228] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 109.
[229] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 4.
[230] Ibid.

In Amsterdam, Walsh evidently experienced a new sense of freedom, part of the city's mythological promise, and it did indeed change him. As Gorman-Murray states, "queer migrant subjects move out in order to come out",[231] and indeed, Walsh moved back to Ireland "determined to deal with any residual conflict" about his sexuality.[232] So, despite Amsterdam, with its freedom regarding sex and sexuality, seemingly living up to its promises, Walsh returned home.

After staying in Dublin for a while, Walsh cites another incident of queer migration: his move to London in the late eighties. Evidently, he was not the only one:

> AIDS continued to devastate our community. After the election, it seemed natural to spin off to London. [...] Everybody was leaving the sinking ship in the late 80's; 90.000 people left in 1989 alone.[233]

In this instance, his migration is not due to an internalised call for adventure motivated by identity exploration; by this point in his life, Walsh is already quite sure of who he is. Instead, this migration is a result of a myth of relative safety from AIDS, and London as a safe haven - or safer haven - compared to Dublin. Walsh does, however, end up moving back to Dublin. As Patrick James McDonagh notes, "Ireland […] since the foundation of the state up to decriminalisation in 1993 had viewed sexual acts between males as criminal activity and homosexuals as sick and perverted".[234] Other countries having more lenient laws concerning the legal status of queerness motivated Walsh and many others to move away from Dublin and Ireland as a whole. With the 1993 decriminalisation of homosexuality, however, something shifted in Dublin, causing Walsh to move back after two years. In the early nineties, "there was a change in the air"[235] in Dublin - a positive change, especially concerning queer rights. Again, an urban space offers a myth, or perhaps a promise, of better things to come. It seems, then, that the myths of space offered to queer individuals shift fluidly depending on the community's specific needs, which frequently differ from mainstream social demands. Additionally, these queer needs also shift based on a person's individual journey in search of identity, which becomes apparent through the framing of the rural-urban contrast in *Come On Home.*

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[231] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 111.
[232] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 4.
[233] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 12.
[234] Patrick James McDonagh, "'Homosexuals Are Revolting'- Gay & Lesbian Activism in the Republic of Ireland 1970s-1990s", *Studi Irlandesi, a Journal of Irish Studies* 7 (2017): 66. http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-20751
[235] McMahon & Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 12.

As discussed above, in *Come On Home,* Michael returns to his small, unnamed village of birth after having been away in London for about twenty years. This village is not framed as a positive environment. It was a toxic place when Michael fled, and upon his return he finds out through talking to the pregnant Aoife that it is still a stifling environment:

AOIFE:
I'll die if I don't get out of this place, Michael. If this baby comes out of me here I will never leave. That will be it.
MICHAEL:
So go. Whose permission are you waiting on?[236]

Michael encouraging her seems to suggest he is in favour of leaving the small village, which a number of characters blame him for. Especially Martina believes in a preconceived myth of the big city as somewhere flashier, fancier, and approaches Michael as if he believes he is better than the villagers he left behind. She accuses him of constantly milling around bars in London,[237] and tells him he will find "nothing fancy [...]. You will find no Pina Colada round here".[238] This both shows an unwillingness to acknowledge that Michael is queer, since she immediately puts a halt to any imagined deviations from what is considered normal in the village, and disregards Michael's actual reason for departing his hometown: his father threw him out of his home, and, as Gorman-Murray states, "sexual identity-affirmation often underpins migration".[239] Michael needed to leave for the mythical free big city to find and become himself. However, *Come On Home* problematises this myth by framing the big cities as not all they are promised to be to queer people.

Like Tonie Walsh, Michael first moves to Dublin, and then to London. Although he was, in Dublin, still visited by his mother, he does indicate he was not very happy there:

AOIFE:
Where did you go?
MICHAEL:

[236] Phillip McMahon, *Come On Home* (London: Oberon Books, 2018): 44.
[237] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 26
[238] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 51.
[239] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 111.

First? Dublin. But it wasn't far enough. I was floating. Feeling sorry for myself. Doing nothing, only hating the world.[240]

Whereas the conventional rural-to-urban myth posits that this new life in a large city should have enabled Michael to come into his own as a queer man, his experience suggests the opposite. When he meets Terry, the man who he ends up loving and losing to an illness, they move to Terry's place in London,[241] where, for a while, Michael finds what mythological queer narratives of urban spaces tend to promise: safety and a home. When Terry dies, however, Michael feels displaced again, as if something is still lacking, now that he has lost what he describes as his "safety net".[242] As Kian Goh notes, "to the extent that the space of the city is sometimes safe for some people, it is due to specific actors, strategies, and processes".[243] Now that Michael has lost a critical actor in his creation of a safe space, and is in the process of mourning and change, his needs have shifted. His trip back to his hometown seems to offer him the kind of reckoning he needed to make peace with his own past, though it is definitely not a homecoming.

Michael not only reunites with his brothers, but with his old lover who finished his education to become a priest and is now Father Cleary. During their final confrontation, Michael makes his stance on his hometown very clear:

MICHAEL:
I will forget about the church and this country and this town, who kept me down, all. Who pushed me out and rejected me, before I even knew how to accept myself. This twisted place. I will force myself to forget.[244]

Ironically, promising yourself to forget will achieve the opposite, since it requires actively recounting a memory to try and forget it. Indeed, despite his obvious negative feelings towards the village, Michael has not been able to forget about the village and he did come back - not just to mourn his mother with his family, but to talk to Father Cleary, who he actively sought out. It becomes clear they were deeply in love back when they were both training to become priests, but Father Cleary is still in denial of his own sexuality. When he offers to leave everything behind and come with Michael, Michael denies him, telling him it's

[240] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 39.
[241] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 40-41.
[242] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 42.
[243] Goh,"Safe Cities and Queer Spaces," 464. 6
[244] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 110.

"too late".[245] What Michael wants most of all is closure. As he left in such a hurry, he never said goodbye to most people in his life that were important to him. After his final conversation with Father Cleary, the stage directions indicate that "something has changed".[246] Now that he has made peace with his past and being brutally torn away from what he thought was his home, he can move into the future with a more stable sense of self.

It is never mentioned in the play where Michael intends to go after the cremation of his mother, but it is obvious that he does not wish to stay. According to Gorman-Murray, "queers often develop a strong affection for placelessness/movement over place/emplacement. If we contemplate queer migration in light of this attachment to movement, it seems likely that for more than a few queer migrants final identity-fixing emplacement may not be as important as the quest itself".[247] As exemplified by both Tonie Walsh's hero journey, and the different migrations of Michael in *Come On Home,* a queer search for identity and community is not defined or even determined by its final destination, as there frequently is no final destination. Queerness is inherently characterised by fluidity, and it stands to reason that the myths of place which motivate queer migration constantly shift as well.

This is also a clear theme in *Once Before I Go,* in which the queer characters move away and towards each other, sometimes together, depending on what they deem necessary in their search for their individual queer identity. *Once Before I Go* takes place in London, Dublin, and Paris, three large and well-known urban spaces, each with their own unique queer scene. In 1987, Daithí and Lynn are already in Dublin, having made the infamous rural-to-urban move which characterises a variety of queer narratives. When Bernard arrives in their apartment, he has only just moved. Despite him barely having settled, he is already fully immersed in the Dublin queer scene:

LYNN:
Did you just say you're going out somewhere?
BERNARD:
(*showcasing his outfit*) What on earth would give you that impression?
LYNN:
I just assumed you'd be sitting in.
BERNARD:

[245] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 109.
[246] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 110.
[247] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 113.

You mad? I am out and I am going out. There's a modest-but-fabulous gang of us hitting up the *Rocky Horror Show* at the *Classic* in Harold's Cross, hence the look.[248]

Bernard's mention of 'us', including himself in a queer group, and the fact that he is going to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* which, as Cameron Crookston acknowledges, "has been a touchstone of queer popular culture for over forty years",[249] places Bernard firmly in the glittering centre of the Dublin queer scene - or at least, *a* Dublin queer scene. Daithí, in contrast, is part of a different queer group altogether, as he is very politically active but refuses to go out, party, or have sex, which comes as a huge shock to Bernard. To Bernard, coming to Dublin is the same as finally coming home, whereas to Daithí, Dublin is not at all a safe space.

Daithí has lived in Dublin longer than Bernard and has experienced first-hand the effects of the AIDS crisis in the big city. This, for him, and the violence threatening the queer community in the streets, has shattered the myth of Dublin as a place of wonder, safety and celebration for him. He is emblematic of Kian Goh's observation that cities can also be "sites of disinvestment, marginalisation, and inequality and spaces of capital accumulation and social contestation".[250] Bernard, on the other hand, has a more *laissez-faire* attitude towards the social and political issues Daithí is so concerned about, and, having just come from a small, prejudiced home, is understandably excited to finally live out the queer life he has always dreamed of in a city which has promised him the ability to do so. To Bernard, cities represent dreams. When he indicates he wants to move to Paris, he says it is because he is a romantic at heart, and wants to "fall in love with a beautiful man and trip around Paris doing sweet fuck all 'cept drinking and dancing".[251]

It is not Bernard who is the first to migrate again, however, but Lynn. As the only lesbian character in *Once Before I Go,* she rightfully illustrates that lesbian lives are often invisible and disregarded, which is one of her main reasons for moving to London without Daithí and Bernard:

LYNN:

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[248] Phillip McMahon, *Once Before I Go* (London: Methuen Drama, 2021): 47-48

[249] Cameron Crookston, "Can I Be Frank with You? Laverne Cox and the Historiographic Dramaturgy of The Rocky Horror Picture Show," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 27, No 2 (2021): 234. DOI 10.1215/10642684-8871677

[250] Goh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces," 464.

[251] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 54.

I want to lesbian without having to do it in the shadow of gay men. Do you know what I mean? I want to dance to dyke music. Enough *Small-Town-Fucking-Boy* already. Where's my anthem?[252]

As someone with a unique queer identity, the myth of Dublin as an inclusive queer space does not apply to her. This underlines Fintan Walsh's observation that "in contemporary Ireland, gay men are often seen as good subjects, and palatable signs of a liberal, multicultural society, while women and non-white Irish are culturally marginalised".[253] Ireland does not offer Lynn the space and recognition she needs, and she thinks that Ireland will not change, and is right to be abandoned.[254] This leads her to chase the myth of a different city: London, where she can explore her lesbian identity on her own terms.

Sara Keating, in her review for *The Irish Times*, notes that *Once Before I Go* is "a play that implores us to join the dance, to live fully, to live without judgment, to live well".[255] This ideal is a central theme in the production, and Lynn, Daithí and Bernard do chase this myth by, for example, migrating to large urban spaces, but it is important to note that they do not do so blindly. All three express the recognition that there is no one place where every problem they encounter as queer individuals will be suddenly solved. The same goes for Michael in *Come On Home,* and for Tonie Walsh. Yet for all of them, whether they are fictional or not, the constant movement from mythical place to mythical place is critical in their search for their own queer identity and community. As Andrew Gorman-Murray summarises, "attachment to movement simultaneously signifies a need queer people often feel to find somewhere—some place—to explore alternative ways of being, at the same time recognizing that this search is ongoing, generating movement between places".[256] The myth is in the destination, but the identity formation is in the movement between these destinations, where queer community is subsequently formed. This process of creating queer safety when a myth does not live up to its promise, is exemplified by the importance and inclusion of queer community spaces in McMahon's plays.

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[252] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 54.
[253] Fintan Walsh, "Introduction," in *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016): 9.
[254] McMahon, *Once Before I Go*, 62.
[255] Sara Keating, Once Before I Go: Join the Dance, Live Fully, Live Without Judgment, Live Well," in *The Irish Times*, October 4th, 2021. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/once-before-i-go-join-the-dance-live-fully-live-without-judgment-live-well-1.4690587
[256] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration," 113.

4.4 Myth Within a Myth: Creating the Queer Home

Kian Goh states that "a now expansive body of research has asserted that space is heterosexually produced - and that there exist nonnormative practices by gender and sexual identity minorities that challenge this and actively 'queer' space".[257] In other words, as queerness is not included in mainstream spatiality, queer spaces have to be consciously created by the community they are meant for. This leads, for example, to the creation of 'gay villages', specific neighbourhoods in urban areas populated by and meant for a queer majority, though Goh does note that they usually cater to white, gay men.[258] Still, they "might offer spaces of fluidity and inclusion for queers of marginalised ethnic groups and lesbians", and thus, "the gay village, prone to commodification and branding, is multivalent and even in its general form is just one of many ways in which LGBT people make claims on space in and outside cities".[259] Gay (or queer) villages may offer the myth of safety and inclusion to queer individuals who are migrating to the space these villages exist in, and have to actively create this promise, or these queer migrants might never move, as they are a vulnerable group, prone to being subjected to violence and prejudice. Even on a smaller scale, queer safe spaces such as clubs and community centres offer its queer visitors the myth that its visitors will find absolute safety and inclusion. These spaces not only serve as mythological safe spaces to draw the queer community together, but also as mythological 'heritage sites' to offer that community something to refer to and unite for: a legacy.

Jonathan Silin states that queer legacies function along different lines compared to mainstream ideas of legacies, which are often connected to the concept of family lineage and bloodlines:

> As queer children we arrive unannounced, a surprise, to parents who imagine legacy in a traditional way. […] My mother's first response when I came out: 'you mean you won't have children. You won't carry forward the family genes.' We are not the legacy vehicle that our parents anticipated. […] I told my parents that despite not having children I carry forward character traits and competencies that were invaluable parental legacies by spending my days in classrooms with other people's children. In their eyes, however, only the biological and primal mattered. Social transmission did not count. My first encounter with the idea of legacy took place on contested ground.[260]

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[257] Goh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces," 465-466.
[258] Goh, "Safe Cities and Queer Spaces," 466.
[259] Ibid.
[260] Jonathan Silin, "Queer Legacies and Their Vicissitudes: On 50 Years of Teaching and Learning," *Teaching Education* 31, No 1 (2020): 59-60. DOI: 10.1080/10476210.2019.1709812

Queer legacies, then, are more concerned with this social transmission: as queer individuals frequently find familial ties outside their own blood relations ('found family'), they do not pass on legacy and history through reproduction, but through a strong community network which spans generations. Fixed places such as legacy sites enable an easier transferral of queer legacies and mythologies through time.

In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* Walsh makes several references to two important queer community spaces which are also featured in *Once Before I Go*: the Hirschfeld Centre, and the club Flikkers, which was part of this centre. They stood in Temple Bar, and were according to Tonie important spaces for the queer community in Dublin:

> It was run by the National Gay Federation. It was where we'd go to dance, and it was there that really seeded my political awareness and helped me to refine my own attitudes to social injustice that had been inherited from three generations of proud feminist matriarchs. It became the place where friendships and alternative families were created.[261]

The centre offered queer individuals a safe space to celebrate, to discuss politics which actually addressed queer issues, and to find community - and, as the word 'families' suggests, a new home. Of course, being a community centre, this is not a home its inhabitants can stay in indefinitely. Andrew Gorman-Murray states that a queer search for home is a mobile one, in which each destination is "a site of attachment where one can momentarily ground one's identity in an ontological and material process of becoming".[262] Queer individuals shift between promises of home in heteronormative spaces: from gay villages to community centres to dance clubs, as part of a quest for queer identity and, importantly, community.

Susan Sellers notes that "myths posit an ideal precedent";[263] they offer its recipient a promise, an ideal. As discussed above, cities promise safety and inclusion, and small-scale queer spaces within this urban landscape do the same, yet are less abstract in that sense, as they are relatively easy to find and access. In *Once Before I Go,* Lynn underlines the vital importance of queer spaces in how they actively serve the queer community:

> DAITHÍ:
> I don't feel like celebrating.
> LYNN:

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[261] McMahon and Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 1.
[262] Gorman-Murray, "Rethinking Queer Migration." 113.
[263] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 3.

> Who's saying anything about celebrating? I'm talking about us coming together. Being close to one another. We need that now more than ever. That club is sacred. That dance floor is the only place we are truly free. [..] All roads start from and lead back to the dance floor. Ad infinitum. Those beats are propelling us forward. Those tunes are the soundtrack to our gay lives and gay liberation. That shitty attic dance floor is the only place on this entire island where we can be ourselves on our own terms.[264]

Lynn's description of the club she is referring to, Flikkers, paints it like it is a holy place, a mythical place of pilgrimage, a home and a safehouse. Her emphasis on 'coming together' underlines how vital these queered spaces are for community formation. In terms of mythology, the 'ideal precedent' these spaces offer is a perfect world, the world the queer community is fighting for and working towards, and that is what sets them apart from heteronormative community spaces. As Michael tells Aoife, his heterosexual sister-in-law in *Come On Home,* "I think *my* dance-floors might look a bit different to your dance-floors".[265]

Actively queered community spaces, then, through their mythological narratives, offer their visitors an opportunity to navigate their own queer identity and to find and build a community. Yet, as mentioned above, these spaces can also act as legacy sites when active use dwindles, but their mythological impact remains. Each year during Dublin Pride, Tonie Walsh organises a free Queer History Walking Tour, during which the audience passes by historically significant places in Dublin, which Walsh contextualises with both fact and personal anecdotes, mobilising audiences to, according to Georgina Perryman, "extend the more intangible aspects of LGBTQ+ cultural heritage into the everyday fabric of the city".[266] One of the tour's aims is also "solidarity building",[267] to create a feeling of unity among its attendants and open up opportunities for new political communities and movements. What this tour underlines, and what the active inclusion of significant queered spaces in McMahon's plays suggests, is that these spaces act as a historical and mythological framework for the queer community to be able to refer to, and to unite for. As Tonie Walsh notes:

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[264] McMahon, *Once Before I Go,* 50.
[265] McMahon, *Come On Home,* 95.
[266] Georgina Perryman. "Queering Pride: Walking Towards a Queer Future in Ireland," *Journal of Public Pedagogies* 4 (2019): 119.
[267] Perryman. "Queering Pride," 122.

It's not about having someplace where we just passively grieve or engage in a nostalgia trip to the 1980s - That's not healthy! It's not enough if it's not anchored to a celebration of what is now, and what is possible in the future.[268]

In other words, these spaces transcend their function as sites of memory and heritage: they offer something more. As part of a mythological framework, they, as Sellers states, bring "into being enabling alternatives",[269] offering hope and ideals for a different tomorrow. In that sense, queer mythological places, through their promises of safety and inclusion, and the queer history and legacies they contain, are not only useful but vital for queer community formation.

[268] McMahon and Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh,* 21.
[269] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 30.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Queer Mythology and Performance

In an article on cultural unity and its relation to queerness, Rictor Norton, a social and literary historian and writer who specialises in queer history, notes that "knowledge of history plays an important role in the development of solidarity: a consciousness of cultural community provides the necessary strength for collective action to overcome oppression".[270] This observation might extend beyond history, into the realm of mythology as well. Queer mythology is the legacy the community leaves each other, to grow from and build upon; to relate to and to change when shifting perspectives call for such a change; and to use as a sort of constellation to navigate by and make sense of one's place and identity within a unique community. As this thesis thus has demonstrated, in *I Am Tonie Walsh, Come On Home* and *Once Before I Go*, the concept of mythology provides crucial context and a necessary framework for the characters' stories. This, in essence, is how mythology functions: as Susan Sellers states, "even the most immediate and intense personal experience […] passes through the common net of images and tales that compromise our understanding of the world. Myths offer ways of making sense of our experience and give crucial insights into the ideologies that underlie our understandings".[271] McMahon's oeuvre emphasises how, for the queer community, mythology is absolutely necessary to allow the community to flourish.

The queer mythologies discussed in this thesis are based on reality, whether that be something or someone real within the context of a fictional story (like Bernard), or someone who is a tangible part of Irish queer history (such as Tonie Walsh). David Cregan notes that "queer memory is more symbolic, derived from what is implied by exclusion rather than inclusion".[272] Remembering and potentially mythologising queer historical places or figures is thus a symbolic process, creating, as Cregan states, an "archaeology of alternative history"[273] which consciously counteracts the assumption that Irish history does not include a lot of queer narratives. In order for that process to be effective, these countercultural queer myths need to be heard outside of the queer community as well, even if they are specifically created by and

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[270] Rictor Norton, "The Search for Cultural Unity," in *Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016): 3.
[271] Susan Sellers, "Contexts: Theories of Myth," in *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001): 7.
[272] David Cregan, "Remembering to Forget: Queer Memory and the New Ireland," in *Memory Ireland* (Sycaruse: Sycaruse University Press, 2011): 184.
[273] Ibid.

in service of the community itself. Otherwise, mainstream perspectives on the place of queerness in Irish history will not be revised.

Alan Butler notes that in narrating queer memories, performance is a powerful tool, stating that "the use of performance as a tool for analysis provides a unique opportunity to conceptualise the actions and performance of LGBTQ+ communities in a manner that is sufficiently detached from notions of inner truths and inescapable identities but, instead asks how individuals and communities make sense of their identity in relation to the environment they inhabit".[274] Narrating queer memories, and subsequently queer myths, through the medium of performance allows the queer community to reflect on these stories and (re)contextualise their own stories and identities. Both hearing and telling queer myths, then, is vital to the community. As a result, theatre performance is a potent tool for creating and telling queer myths, since the setting invites both members of the queer community and members of the mainstream to engage with these myths and find new ways to make sense of them. Theatre performance, with its elements of physicality, enables what Shonagh Hill describes as "the transformative process of writing the body and of self-sculpting, thereby exploring the inscription of meaning on the body, as well as the potential for resistance".[275] Performance, then, as this thesis has set out to show, allows for narrative control over myths, which is a vital political tool for marginalised communities who are in need of mythologies in their service.

5.2 Panti Bliss: Embodying Queer Mythology

This activist potential of mythical performance is prominently exemplified and embodied by famous Irish drag queen Panti Bliss, whose politics serve as an extrapolation of what has been discussed above. Bliss, the drag persona of Rory O'Neill, rose to political fame during an interview on RTÉ's *The Saturday Night Show*, on 11 January 2014, when O'Neill pointed out that there was still homophobia present in the Irish press, even if it seemed subtle sometimes, stating "that columnists still wrote "horrible and mean" things about gay people in newspapers".[276] Consequently, several individuals threatened legal action; this became known

[274] Alan Butler, "Creating Spaces in the Community Archive for Queer Life Stories to be (Re)performed and captured," *Oral History* 48, No 1 (2020): 60. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48568048
[275] Shonagh Hill, "Olwen Foúeré's Corpus," in *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 235
[276] Emer O'Toole, "Guerilla Glamour: The Queer Tactics of Dr. Panti Bliss, "*Éire-Ireland* 52, No 3&4 (2017): 105. https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2017.0024

as "Pantigate".[277] Emer O'Toole notes that "notably, it was O'Neill as opposed to Bliss who made these remarks—the conventionally handsome, clean cut, (comparatively) polite, and just a little camp O'Neill, whose opinions on homophobia were to cause such consternation".[278] In subsequent political actions, however, such as Bliss's famous ten-minute 'Noble Call' speech at the Abbey Theatre, in 2014, during which she touched on the homophobic oppression she experienced, and her subsequent involvement with the 2014 Marriage Referendum campaign, O'Neill did not make an appearance: Panti did. O'Toole notes that Bliss herself explained this decision by "reasoning that whereas Rory is a real person with ordinary personal baggage, Panti is not […]. Thus people could turn her into an avatar for 'the kind of Ireland they wanted'".[279] The fictionalised, and, in fact, mythologised nature of heroes and icons allows for a fluidity in what they embody and represent. Panti Bliss is a performance, stylised and curated, allowing O'Neill complete control over what she means to the queer community at that time.

Fintan Walsh states that Panti Bliss, and her performances, "have engaged and provoked national and international debates about queer activism and apathy, HIV/AIDS, same-sex partnership and marriage, culture and capitalism".[280] The political power of her performance, however, is not just visible in her presence, but also her absence. O'Neill has claimed that his reason for not performing as Panti, but as Rory, during his 2023 appearance on *Dancing with the Stars,* relates to the presentation of his gender. In an interview with *The Irish Independent,* he has stated that he wants "there to be two boys dancing together in people's living rooms at 6.30 pm […]. That's kind of important, to not have the 'faffery' around it".[281] His ability to step out of his mythological role as Panti Bliss and return to himself, even if Panti is an integral part of who he is and even if his dance is still a performance, underlines the fluidity of queer mythologies, and their ability to shift based on the community's specific need. On Twitter, O'Neill/Bliss has claimed that the dance is dedicated to Professor Fiona Mulcahy, one of the first doctors to treat him when he was

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[277] Luke Waller, "Panti Bliss A.K.A. Rory O'Neill," in *Politico,* accessed February 25th, 2023. https://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28/panti-bliss-a-k-a-rory-oneill/

[278] Emer O'Toole, "Guerilla Glamour: The Queer Tactics of Dr. Panti Bliss, "*Éire-Ireland* 52, No 3&4 (2017): 105. https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2017.0024

[279] O'Toole, "Guerilla Glamour," 107.

[280] Fintan Walsh, "Activism, Drag, and Solo Performance," in *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016): 21.

[281] Melanie Finn, "Panti Bliss: 'I want there to be two boys dancing on TV at 6.20pm'," in *The irish Independent*, January 10th, 2023. https://www.independent.ie/news/panti-bliss-i-want-there-to-be-two-boys-to-be-dancing-on-tv-at-630pm-42274103.html

diagnosed as HIV-positive.[282] O'Neill recognised the opportunity to do something pivotal on national television, as the performance marked the first time a same-sex couple performed together on *Dancing with the Stars.*[283]

O'Neill and Panti exemplify Walsh's notion that "queer activist initiatives have deployed a plethora of performance tactics, and how these approaches have evolved into more recognisably theatrical modes, which have shaped and expanded the landscape of contemporary Irish theatre and performance".[284] Panti has made a variety of theatrical shows: *In These Shoes?* (2007), *All Dolled Up* (2007), and *A Woman in Progress* (2009), all in cooperation with THISISPOPBABY, the theatre and events production company co-directed by Phillip McMahon. Such productions, and, as this thesis has shown, McMahon's oeuvre more generally, underline the necessity of queer performances being seen outside of their community of origin as well. As Fintan Walsh states, "Panti has played a pivotal role in deploying performance as activism […] for more conventional theatre spaces and contexts";[285] this applies to the theatre of Phillip McMahon, as well. The conventional nature of the performance settings ensure that queer narratives, and by extension queer mythologies performed and reframed within those narratives, can be accessed by a wide public, increasing the visibility of the queer community and validating the mythologies it builds on. This makes the inclusion of queer myths of people and of places in McMahon's oeuvre all the more vital.

5.3 "We Must Continue to Make a Show of Ourselves"

In *I Am Tonie Walsh, Come On Home* and *Once Before I Go,* then, mythological figures are not only queered, but often auto-created, as discussed in chapter 3: pivotal queer figures establish themselves as queer mythological heroes. This autobiographical approach to myth-making ties in with Shonagh Hill's theorisation of embodied feminine mythologies: as she states, "myths can impose limiting and inflexible representations which present female identity as timeless and unchangeable, yet it is through their attention to embodied female experience that the theatre makers […] resist this illusion".[286] When applied to another marginalised group, the queer community, it makes sense for the queer people in McMahon's plays to actively claim agency over their own mythified identities, and create mythological

[282] Panti Bliss (@pantibliss), "This is so," Twitter, February 10th, 2023. https://twitter.com/PantiBliss/status/1624103068181708800?s=20
[283] Finn, "Panti Bliss: 'I want there to be two boys dancing on TV at 6.20pm'."
[284] Walsh, "Activism, Drag, and Solo Performance," 21.
[285] Walsh, "Activism, Drag, and Solo Performance," 44.
[286] Shonagh Hill, "Introduction: a Creative Female Corporeality," in *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 5-6.

narratives which are beneficial to the community in a political act of self-creation. This may be what Panti Bliss meant when she told her younger self: "you are your own pope".[287] Queer mythification, then, means not only self-acceptance, but self-worship; it entails actively elevating a queer person in service of the community. Through characters such as Bernard and Tonie Walsh (who is, arguably, a character in his own play despite not being a fictional person), McMahon shows how valuable mythified queer people can be to the community as a whole and those closest to them, for both political and personal reasons. This type of queer mythmaking actively strengthens what normative society consciously or subconsciously weakens, such as unity, stability, and free and fluid identity creation. This not only extends to queer myths of people, but queer myths of place, too.

As shown in chapter 4, queer mythological places are frequently not final destinations, but short- or long-term stops on a queer person's spiritual journey towards self-discovery and self-love. In that sense, queer mythical places can function as pilgrimage locations. Peter Jan Margry notes that "shrines and pilgrimages have characteristics which enable them to generate, stimulate or revitalize religious devotion and religious identity".[288] Even if queerness and religion are very different concepts with divergent contexts and associations, Margry also states that the definition of pilgrimage has broadened since the 1980s onwards to extend beyond the borders of religious contexts, when the term became "embedded in common parlance".[289] Queer pilgrimage locations are thus similarly significant to queer identity formation because of their mythological and spiritually significant quality. In *I Am Tonie Walsh,* Tonie Walsh undertakes a hero's pilgrimage to Amsterdam. In *Come On Home,* Michael goes on a journey to find a way to be at peace with his own queer identity, even if this is not a voluntary decision due to his father throwing him out of the house. In *Once Before I Go,* all characters are constantly in flux, moving from place to place depending on what they feel they need. What all three plays thus emphasise is the necessity of spatial movement for queer identity formation, and, additionally, how vital it is for queer mythological spaces to incite this mobility.

Margry defines 'pilgrimage' as "a journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a place that is regarded as more sacred or salutary than the environment of everyday life, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult

[287] Walsh, "Activism, Drag, and Solo Performance," 33.
[288] Peter Jan Margry, "Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World. New Itineraries Into the Sacred* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008): 15.
[289] Margry, "Secular Pilgrimage," 17.

object for the purpose of acquiring spiritual, emotional or physical healing or benefit".[290] This beneficial quality is what especially validates the continued mythification of locations for the queer community, whether it be small locations such as graves of important queer heroes or nightclubs, or larger locations such as 'gaybourhoods' or even entire cities. In McMahon's three plays, the journeys to and between queer mythological places are shown to not always be easy, but rewarding in the end. Without a queer mythified pilgrimage location, Tonie Walsh never would have become the queer hero he is today, since his time in Amsterdam was significant in helping him come to terms with and be more free in his identity as a queer man. Without the mythological safety offered by Dublin and London, *Come On Home'*s Michael would not have found another queer person, the man with whom he fell in love and who helped him on his journey towards peace and acceptance in terms defining himself as queer. In *Once Before I Go,* big cities such as London, Dublin and Paris, but also nightclubs and community centres, offer all queer characters the mythological promise of freedom and safety, and even if those promises are not always kept, each location offers new opportunities to navigate queer identities and communities.

John D'Emilio notes that "a successful movement, and especially one based on identifying with a group that is targeted for oppression, requires a range of methods for drawing people together".[291] These methods can build on something a community shares, such as a history or a mythology. When teaching LGBTQ+ history and issues at a university, D'Emilio was struck by the lack of awareness amongst queer-identifying students of their own community history and legacy.[292] Despite a number of efforts to bring queer pasts and stories to light, then, the community is still in need of a continued push for better visibility and acknowledgement of the legacies which underlie queer history and mythology. As David Cregan notes, "by uncovering previously hidden gay and lesbian experiences, queer historians have initiated a type of cultural rebellion, juxtaposing queer memory with hetero-normative histories".[293] This is why it is so important that the legendary queer places and histories which constitute the mythologies in McMahon's plays are included and celebrated. As Susan Sellers notes, myths "only become accessible through projection and telling";[294] and, in fact, through repetition. It is only through the active inclusion of queer mythologies in queer narratives that

[290] Margry, "Secular Pilgrimage," 15.
[291] John D'Emilio, "Introduction," in *Queer Legacies: Stories from Chicago's LGBTQ Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020): 6.
[292] D'Emilion, "Introduction," 2.
[293] David Cregan, "Remembering to Forget: Queer Memory and the New Ireland," in *Memory Ireland* (Sycaruse: Sycaruse University Press, 2011): 184.
[294] Sellers, "Theories of Myth," 5.

they are solidified in service of the community, and are also able to be seen, understood, and validated outside of this community. In the words of Tonie Walsh: “We must continue to make a show of ourselves. To be fucking fabulous. Together”.[295]

[295] Phillip McMahon and Tonie Walsh, *I Am Tonie Walsh*, script received from McMahon via email on September 29th, 2022, Third Draft (October 4th, 2018): 21.

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