The Midnight Court by Ciaran Carson

Master poet, storyteller and translator Ciaran Carson has great fun with this eighteenth-century erotic masterpiece, which deals with the topic of repression, sexual and otherwise. The Midnight Court has been called "one of the greatest comic works of literature, and certainly the greatest comic poem ever written in Ireland." (Seán Ó Tuama)

The Midnight Court by Brian Merriman, translated from the Irish by Ciaran Carson from Part One

'Twas my custom to stroll by a clear winding stream,
With my boots full of dew from the lush meadow green,
Near a neck of the woods where the mountain holds sway,
Without danger or fear at the dawn of the day.

And the sight of Lough Graney would dazzle my eyes,
As the countryside sparkled beneath the blue skies;
Uplifting to see how the mountains were stacked,
Each head peeping over a neighbouring back.

It would lighten the heart, be it listless with age,
Enfeebled by folly, or cardiac rage —
Your wherewithal racked by financial disease —
To perceive through a gap in the wood full of trees
A squadron of ducks on a shimmering bay,
Escorting the swan on her elegant way…

…Beat out as I was and in need of a doze,
I laid myself down where a grassy bank rose
By the side of a ditch, in arboreal shade,
Where I stretched out my feet, and pillowed my head…

The story is an aisling — a Gaelic literary genre, in which a poet wanders and meets a beautiful fairy woman who is ultimately identified as Ireland herself, prophesying the return of her power — but this is an aisling stood on its head. As Carson explains: "Merriman subverted all that. His fairy woman is not beautiful, but a threatening monster. The vision that she discloses is not of a future paradise, but a present reality. … The protagonists of the 'Court,' including 'Merriman' himself, are ghosts, summoned into being by language; they are figments of the imagination. In the 'Court' the language itself is continually interrogated and Merriman is the great illusionist, continually spiriting words into another dimension."

“Carson’s translation of 'The Midnight Court' is that rarest of things: a small and utterly enjoyable masterpiece. It brings to a wider audience than ever before a great and neglected piece of 18th century literature and, to an American readership, something equally important. In this country, poetry now is more frequently written than read, and the pleasures of the long poem are all but lost. By and large, our poets lack ambition and their meager audiences the patience. What Carson offers the willing in these 60 pages of poetry with a brief introduction is a rollicking evening of instruction in the pleasures of a long and entertaining poem.”

Tim Rutten, Los Angeles Times
Ciaran Carson

"Ciaran Carson is one of the best poets we have on both sides of the Atlantic and the publication of every one of his books is a major event in our literatures." Charles Simic

Ciaran Carson was born in 1948 in Belfast and educated at The Queen's University there. He knows intimately not only the urban Belfast in which he was raised as a native Irish speaker, but also the traditions of rural Ireland. A traditional musician and a scholar of the Irish oral traditional, Carson was long the Traditional Arts Officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

In 2003, Carson was appointed Chair of Poetry at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at The Queen's University, and lives in Belfast with his wife, fiddle player Deirdre Shannon, and three children.


His translation of Dante's Inferno (2002) was awarded the Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

Carson's black humor, satire, and playful and serious interests in wordplay make him, as Ben Howard described in a retrospective of Carson's career in Shenandoah, "one of the most gifted poets now writing in England and Ireland."

In addition to poetry, Carson's prose books include Last Night's Fun, about traditional Irish music; The Star Factory, his personal history of Belfast; the dazzling, magical Fishing for Amber; and the strange and hallucinogenic Shamrock Tea. Established in 1976, Wake Forest University Press specializes in Irish poetry.

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$50 clothbound (Limited, signed, and numbered first edition with vellum wrapper)
ISBN: 1-930630-26-3
ISBN13 978-1-930630-26-0

$12.95 paperback
ISBN 1-930630-25-5
ISBN13 978-1-930630-25-3