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"Somethin' evil moved in on me blood…": Female violence and the Medean tale of *By the Bogs of Cats*…, by Marina Carr

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Abstract: Medea's archetype, that of the murderous mother, is widely known. Nowadays, has been used as a way to criticize the oppressive system that subjugates women and outsiders. In this context, *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998), by Irish playwright Marina Carr, is a reference to a developing Ireland, where whatever economic growth was not the same as social progress. The play reflects the feeling of frustration over not belonging. A postcolonial feminist reading allows for the identification of the Gothic "return of the oppressed" trope through violence. Hester, a Traveller woman located in a settled community, suffers from a long life of prejudice and, in order to protect herself and her daughter Josie from this, she commits filicide and suicide. Through this, she subverts the capitalist logic of meritocracy, and the critique is found in the use of violence as retaliation.

Key-words: *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998); Female Violence; Medea Archetype; Traveller culture.

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Resumo: O arquétipo de Medeia, a mãe assassina, é conhecido no mito grego ou em suas representações no teatro e na literatura. Na atualidade, tal arquétipo tem sido usado como forma de crítica ao sistema que oprime mulheres e estrangeiros, e é nesse contexto que *By the Bogs of Cats…* (1998), da dramaturga irlandesa Marina Carr, encontra-se em referência a uma Irlanda em desenvolvimento, onde o crescimento econômico parecia sinônimo de melhoria da vida da população. Podendo ser considerada uma releitura feminista pós-colonial, *By the Bogs of Cats…* possibilita a ideia gótica de retorno dos oprimidos em forma de violência. Hester, uma *Traveller* [viajantes irlandeses ou *Pavees*] que se encontra numa comunidade assentada e fora do

seu habitat conhecido do pântano, age em favor de se proteger e proteger sua filha, Josie, da violência cotidiana advinda do preconceito e do abuso. Ao cometer filicídio e suicídio, ela age em subversão de valores de gênero e poder. A crítica do texto pode, então, ser compreendida através do uso da violência como retaliação à organização social que oprime aqueles que se encontram nas margens.

Palavras-chave: *By the Bogs of Cats…* (1998); Violência Feminina; Arquétipo de Medea; cultura *Traveller*.

> "MEDEA: My friends, I have decided to act and at once. I will kill the children and then quit this land. I will not delay and so deliver them to other hands to spill their blood more eagerly. […] For though you will put them to the sword, you loved them well. Oh, I am a woman born to sorrow!" (Euripides, *Medea*)
>
> "HESTER: Goodbye, sweetheart – Josie, ya won't see me again now." (Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats…*)

1. Introduction

The excerpts presented are a display of the motherly words delivered preceding Medea's and Hester's murder of their respective children. Both are motivated by the same reason: a betrayal of their husbands, who decided to marry younger women to the detriment of their wives and children's well-being. Also, similarly, both are firstly removed from their birth houses and led to a different space where they do not feel comfortable living and were judged to be "witches". By being women with no land and no name, who suffer from those who swore to love them, the implicit or explicit vengeance and violence present in the plays seems, at least, cathartic. In this sense, *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998) is a retelling of Medea's story[3], a prominent tale from Greek mythology of a woman who kills her own children, is an abrasive journey through the history of women's rights - and wrongs -, from Ancient Greece to *fin de siècle* Ireland.

[3] The figure of Medea, present across different works of art concerning Greek mythology, was made popular mainly by Euripides' 431 BCE tragic play *Medea* and in the final moments of Hesiod's *Theogony*. On a different note, a translation of *By the Bog of Cats…* into Brazilian Portuguese was published by Rafael Copetti in 2017: *No Pântano dos Gatos...*. It results from Alinne Fernandes's doctoral research conducted at Queen's University Belfast (2009-2012).

Taking such similarities as well as particularities into account, the aim of this study is to engage with the historical and conceptual details behind a character's composition and to examine violence in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998). In order to conduct this, we will investigate Hester's actions and events that help build the monstrous aspects of the character in the play. Added to the analysis of the play's elements will be a contextualization of violence, womanhood and cultural identity in Travellers' communities and in the 1990s Ireland. The methodology applied to this study involves carrying out a bibliographical review on the issues of female violence and a brief overview of women's rights in modern Ireland through a postcolonial feminist lens; followed by a close reading-based discussion on character development in the play, providing its context and plot progression as analysis material.

2. Literature review

2.1. Female violence and the betrayed woman

To the Gothic contemporary imagination, violence is "inseparable from the violation of the subject" (Punter; Bronfen, 2001, p.17), and it can be concealed or exposed by the narrative. By expanding this idea, we arrive at the formation of the Other in Gothic literature, which is a driving force behind the "formation of subjectivity" (Fletcher, 1999, p. 1). As pointed out by Laurie Ringer (2016) in her evaluation of violence in "Gothic-with-teeth[4]" stories, characters accepted as the Other are conceptualized to suffer from numerous kinds of violence, and it is common for such portrayals of violence to be linked to their identities. In this sense, the Other is used as a source of fear and anxiety through a folk understanding of a text. As for *Medea*, a public and a cast composed by standard citizens - by any means, a free male who was a member of the *polis* -, it was the foreigner, womanly witch who was capable

[4] According to Ringer (2016), the term comes from the fact that "teeth are iconic symbols of death, predation, threat, pain, abjection, obsession, and revulsion throughout the Gothic" (p. 23-24)

of killing a child as an act of vengeance. Therefore, how this profile is reproduced in 1990s Ireland is worth investigating, and this study sets out to explore such a topic.

Historically, female rage becomes an object of observation from many angles of psychology and artistic production. From the classical hysterical woman to the fetishization of women's anger in modern film and literature, there is an undergoing stigma attached to violent women. As synthesized by Jean Bethke Elshtain in her 1987's investigation of the relations between women and war, "The 'female' has occupied a symbolic and social site deemed potentially uncontrollable: 'it is felt that women can lose mindless destruction and violence on the world about her.'" (p. 169). While inspecting this aspect, she concludes that "Female violence [...] was an aberration, an eruption of not wholly disciplined subjects, partial outlaws." (p. 169). Violent women are thus turned monstrous, their subjectivity reduced, thus they are subsequently rejected to the realm of Otherness. The female who expresses her rage with vengeful acts is, thus, abjected.

In theatre, such a relation between abjection and violence is turned into performance and embodiment[5]. According to Judith Butler (2004), this is a movement that departs from "narratives of containment" and achieves the site of "narratives of female resistance". The author discusses the violence against women and the power structures that support it, which can be subverted by a feminist reading of these issues, such as the resistance of women against the various power structures of patriarchy, be it in literature or social life. Using Medea's case, the story expresses the fear of women destroying men's legacy, but it also challenges a traditional figure of the passive woman and proposes the possibility that she may evade justice (PORTER, 2017). Such violation of gendered norms or social perceptions reinforces the patriarchal order of society, which is highly based on the maternal role and the expected love that is part of it.

Medea's attitude in the face of treason has been revisited throughout history. It is possible to say that the plot of the myth hangs on the desire of domesticating a seemingly wild woman, and how this ideal of possessing a dangerous, powerful "specimen" would provide men with the appraisal of a society composed by other men

[5] On this, there is an interesting relation to be established between performativity of gender and performativity of the theater action.

(Vasillopulos, 2014, p. 42). This situation, however, does not seem to end well for all those men in early literary and drama traditions, since when injured or offended, those female figures would turn to a vengeful act as a form of aggression[6]. The idealized wild woman is now a female monster that, even when being considered the possession of someone else, cannot be completely under one's control. Such a notion subverts the motherly image and places the female individual as an unpredictable subject capable of fierceness and sometimes cruelty, thus decentring the hegemonic male agency over violence.

Therefore, the archetype of Medea can also be considered a narrative device for the trope of the betrayed woman. In that sense, she fits into the popular imagination of a scheming, destructive and vengeful female character. Unlike the representations of Greek mythology and theatre, however, this character underwent the reformulation of a feminist lens. With themes of the female condition in Ancient Greece, as well as the ideals of gender performance in such contexts, and the position of the foreigner in a settled society, Medea is an exploration of the sociocultural order that governs a community, and how they operate in spite of the plea for women's rights. As Betine van Zyl Smit (2002, p. 102) suggests, there is no possible understanding of the source play as advocating for women's rights, but it is possible for modern artists to revisit it and apply this interpretation, especially after the emergence of feminist and postcolonial theories in critical circles. Such rereading, by updating the myth to contemporary artistic contexts, redefines the issues posited before, generating parallel discussions that might spread out to shed light on similar power structures and relations present in contemporary contexts.

Postcolonial feminist critique is therefore a possible scope from which to contemplate the tropes and themes that the play suggests. Deepika Bahri (2006) points out "that nearly all the issues central to postcolonial feminism are concerned with the various ways of reading gender: in the world, the word, and the text" (p. 200). By reading the history and the social and institutional decisions established within the

[6] Such are the cases of *Odyssey*'s sorceress Circe and the husband-murdering Clytemnestra from Aeschylus' *Oresteia.*

context of a work of art, one is better equipped for engaging with the text as an inseparable entity built through and for a given social backdrop. Bahri also mentions the importance of scrutinizing gender relations through history and culture (2006, p. 200), which similarly enables a politically engaged understanding of a text. And it is through the composition of fictional characters and the interplay of word and action that drama builds its main narrative means, so looking at the cultural particularities behind the adaptation of an ancient myth to a modern and culturally localized setting helps update a critical view of gender inequalities.

2.2.The Irish Traveller Medea

When it comes to the Irish history of coloniality, "Ireland offers a further cross-cutting for postcolonial studies to see the intermixing of cultures in Britain's first colony" (Scanlon & Kumar, 2019, p. 203). The economic impact left by the exploitation and institutional dependency left by British rule affected the rural areas for a long time, and some artistic renditions of that social landscape result in portrayals of poverty and conflicts of power. For Scanlon and Kumar (2019), some effects of the colonial period in Ireland can be noticed through the sentiments of "brutality, dispossession, loss and displacement, which have emerged as being central to issues of ethnicity, culture and identity" (p. 203). Hester is a character from Carr's play who is portrayed as directly affected by issues of loss, and such an image mirrors in fiction a larger cultural issue of "dispossession [and] displacement" (Scanlon & Kumar, 2019, p. 203). That issue in turn goes back to the diasporic aspect of Traveller culture, and the fact that the transit and economic practices of Travellers were at times deemed reprehensible and even illegal in English urban centres (Gmelch, 1975, p. 10). The social structures and interactions between the English and the Irish had, among several other problems outside of the scope of this study, roots in centuries of imperial rule and subsequent economic, political and linguistic impositions (Scanlon & Kumar, 2019, p. 205).

Additional topics worth exploring are the convergent issues of infanticide and child abandonment. According to Emma Griffiths (2006, p. 48), infant exposure is

another concern to be taken into consideration when it comes to the representations of social controversies in the myth of Medea. The practice would spare the parents of the "blood guilt" of killing a child and would instead offer them the option of abandoning such a child so they could be fostered by a willing family. Both cases can be linked to a child's fear of abandonment, a theme present in *By the Bog of Cats*…. The decision of accepting or rejecting an infant, however, was made by the father, which would grant the caregiving mother a secondary and passive role in raising a child they bore. Thus, a mother taking in her hands the choice of killing her children was, again, seen as subversive and unnatural – and cause for fear in men since a woman would thus be considered the threatening Other.

Given that basis, there is a possibility to discuss how revisiting Medea through the perspective of a woman can be a subversive act. Firstly, those retellings "often have been politically motivated to reflect specific concerns at critical times, recalling Ireland's long history of cultural conflict, political division, and civil unrest" (O'Brien, 2012, p. 158), thus engaging with a character of social critique. In that context, Carr's revision of Medea brings more than sociopolitical perspective, but also a new exploration of what it means to be a woman and a foreigner in such an imagined social scenario (O'Brien, 2012). By counteracting themes that are perceived as traditional in Western societies, such as motherhood, marriage, and family relationships, she provides contentious representation of an established idea of womanhood. Specifically, through the in-scene deaths, she highlights a transformation in the way one can see this Other.

By choosing to set her play in an Irish Traveller community, Marina Carr grants the fiction of her drama a historical backdrop. Based on information acquired in the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy*, Aoife Bhreatnatch (2007) discusses Travellers as a group "prone to 'intemperance and brawling', although mostly among themselves" (p. 47). According to the author's historical suggestion, such a tendency to endogenous violence was interpreted by law-enforcing authorities as not worth investigating – although this assumption was not valid when those were convicted of crimes against settled citizens. As a marginalized and oppressed group, however, they still face

challenges when it comes to education, employment, and healthcare, while also composing a large portion of the Irish imprisoned population (Gallagher, 2022). Such conditions have led to substance abuse and suicide rates among Traveller women being "five times higher than the general population" (Pavee Point, 2015). This context of exclusion by ethnicity and female vulnerability serves as subject matter for the narrative of oppression in a retelling of the myth of Medea[7].

2.3. Women's rights in the late-20th-century Ireland

Another point to be made is the time-period at which the story is set: 1990s Ireland. Published in the year the play came out, Yvonne Galligan's (1998) investigation on women and politics in contemporary Ireland is an instigating resource to understand women's rights in the early Celtic Tiger era. She starts her account of women's movement by remembering the few women who engaged in political and social debate advocating for the rights of women in the 1960s, and how such a movement progressed into the first woman elected president - Mary Robinson - and, conversely, to the still prevalent ban on abortion rights in the 1990s (Galligan, 1998, p. 1). As for the remaining British legacy in terms of public policies in Ireland, she states that "The process of changing those policies offers interesting insights into how a relatively new country shapes a national identity, especially for its female citizen" (Galligan, 1998, p. 4). Therefore, it is possible to understand the relationship between colonizer and colonized through remaining values in a postcolonial context.

To this issue can be added the series of conflicts in which Irish people were involved during all the country's history, but especially throughout the 20th century; during which period several struggles for women's rights bloomed around the world. As Susan Faludi (2006) points out, "A backlash against women's rights […] returns every

[7] There is a myriad of studies carried out on the issues of female vulnerability, violence, and trauma in the fiction of *By the Bog of Cats…*, as in the case of Eda Dedebas (2013), who investigates a renewal of female agency in female-centred tragedies; or Jinan Jassim (2019), who explores the image of the defiant mother in the play; or still Derek Gladwin (2011), who tackles the importance of the bog in the Irish imagination and how it relates to the portrayal of dispossessed cultures in Ireland, such as the Traveller communities.

time women begin to make some headway toward equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the culture's brief flowerings of feminism" (p. 61). Irish politics have been informed by religious ideals and struggles throughout its history; as a result, Irish women have constantly struggled to acquire basic rights over family, reproduction and employment. The setbacks in political and civil rights for women in Ireland can be linked to the confluence of social conflicts, political unrest, and conservatism, which made it more difficult for women to overcome boundaries and stigmas imposed by religious hegemonic power structures.

Consequently, a relevant issue to be discussed is the establishment and changes in Family Law in Ireland, which was reformed in 1989, during the 1990s, and again in 2019[8]. On that note, Dorothy McBride Stetson (1986), when discussing women's rights in 1980s France, argues that "An essential part of feminism is the belief that the status of women in the family determines their status in all other areas of life" (p. 81 *apud* Galligan, 1998, p. 90). In this sense, Galligan (1998) highlights the previous changes during an earlier phase of feminism that other countries in Europe underwent in opposition to the strict laws over marriage and children that Ireland still held. The Irish Family Law was settled alongside British common law in the 17th century and deals "with a range of legal options relating to family and domestic matters" (The Courts Service of Ireland, [2022]), such as divorce, financial maintenance, and domestic violence. It is important to notice that, despite incorporating some rights for women in its text, the Family Law during the 1990s did not "[undergo] any fundamental value restructuring" (Galligan, 1987, p. 106). Within these changes, the legalization of divorce in 1997 was a landmark in comparison to the previous laws on family issues, already during the Celtic Tiger economic period.

Despite Irish women's achievements during that moment of rapid development, economic liberation did not particularly apply to Irish women, especially when considering class issues (Kennedy, 2003, p. 95). One major change in this economical shift was the number of women participating in the workforce, especially mothers,

[8] See Ireland (1989, 1995, 2019).

although the larger part not receiving enough to pay for living by themselves or for childcare (Kennedy, 2003, pp. 97-98. In regard to this, Sinéad Kennedy (2003) points out that "Women's oppression has its roots in the contradiction between social production and privatised reproduction", either the capital role and the familiar role (p. 107). Even the shift to a more "secular Ireland" does not converge with women's liberation, despite the "transformation in family structure, sex and sexuality and, [...] [general] lives of Irish women", since such women were still living in troublesome and economically disrupted marriages (KENNEDY, 2003, p. 95). Derek Gladwin (2016) states that the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger which

> [...] ushered in a new era of alleged economic prosperity and cultural capital, can more critically be defined as a period of neocolonialism, where neoliberal economics exploit previously colonised countries, such as Ireland, to avail of lower tax rates and a cheaper, educated workforce. (p. 168)

Through such description, the author emphasizes the neo-Gothic appeal of the play, which uses the bog space as representative of how "impoverishment and dispossession of marginalized populations increased" during the period where the main-narrative was of progress and independence (p. 169). By depicting the haunting and death encapsulated in the bog space and a decadence of the Irish colonial state, Marina Carr positions women under a postcolonial light in her story.

After this brief review of Irish women's situation throughout the 1990s, we may return to the issue of female violence as a display of defiance. Unlike Jennifer Jones in her introduction to *Medea's Daughters*[9] (2003), we would argue that this kind of representation of a murderess and of female rage, when written by women, carries a particular subversive role in that authorship is employed as an instrument of resistance. Jones highlights the myth of female passivity and how women were no more content in being submissive, two ideas that can be largely applied to Medea and Hester's contexts for violence. Ailbhe Smyth (1989) adds that "Women's experiences, visions, voices are

[9] Jones' main analyses are of male-written pieces and range from Medea to current times, therefore they may not be considered feminist. She argues that "dramatic representations of criminal women proliferate in times of feminist activity because they contain anxiety about gender roles and, in so doing, deflect attention away from the systematic repression of women" (p. xiii). However, she contradicts herself later on by positing these representations of criminal women as acts of resistance.

fated to be submerged by the relentless flow of patriarchal myth and history, of politics and economics" (p. 7). Such a tendency is reinforced by the concept of freedom for women, something that departs from the right to autonomy that has been historically reserved to men in several societal models. In *By the Bog of Cats…*, this is brought back by the violence Hester suffers from the community, but especially by Carthage's role in oppressing her to a breaking point in which she displays violent behaviour.

3. Investigating female violence in *By the Bog of Cats…*

First, it is necessary to locate the play within a critical perspective. Despite a portrayal of feminism not being precisely what informs Hester's decision to respond to the emerging issues with violence, this is a narrative that encompasses how feminist struggles can be found in unlikely spaces. The story can be looked at from a postcolonial feminist viewpoint. As previously addressed, women still faced gender-based violence and discrimination in Celtic Tiger-era Ireland, regardless of the country's economic ascension, which led to expectations of improvement in quality of life and civil rights for minorities. In the play, this is reflected by the violence Hester suffers from the surrounding community and from her partner, which points to a postcolonial feminist reading of the play.

A pivotal point to be made on previous instances of Medean narratives relates to how violence is displayed. In the source text for Medea written in Ancient Greece, the killing of her former family is only referred to by other characters, and the main action of the play - the infanticide - is hinted at but hidden from the public; even the bodies remain inside the house and are only seen by those on stage. Such care in burying the violence away from the audience's eyes, however, is not maintained in more recent adaptations of the play, as in the case of Deborah Warner's 2002 production. In *By the Bog of Cats…*this less strict out-of-scene approach to displays of violence is also brought to the view of the public, both by words and action. A few instances: the scene instruction "Hester Swane trails the corpse of a black swan after her, leaving a trail of blood in the snow" (Carr, 1998, p. 13); the conversation between Hester and Carthage

about their killing of her brother (p. 74); the final scene in which, as Hester dances the Ghost Fancier, she dies with a fishing knife plunged into her heart (p. 80).

In spite of the displays of violence, there are hints of affection and care in the portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship in the play. There lingers a dichotomy between Big Josie's relationship with young Hester and Hester's own motherly affection towards Josie Kilbride. Griffiths (2012, p. 48) writes about the basic difference in aggression from abandoning and killing your own child, in that the latter spares the parents of the guilt of the second. By leaving Hester alone in the Bog of Cats, Big Josie engenders a fear of abandonment that will follow her child for all her life. As such, she reacts in an extreme fashion when Carthage plans to do the same and leave her alone – without even her own child, whom she bore and nurtured. So, even though the reason why Big Josie abandoned Hester is not clear despite the guilt involved, the reason why Hester killed Josie Kilbride in turn is made clear: she is providing her daughter with what would be an early escape from the misogynist and racist society where they live, as without her mother the child might have gone through a life of judgment and exclusion as well. This is reinforced by the fact that Hester lived with the stigmas of being abandoned as a child while being a woman and considered an outsider in her community; consequently, it is expected that she would not do the same to her daughter. Carthage in fact tries to assert his possession over Josie against Hester's care of her (Carr, 1998, p. 33).

But there is more to be considered concerning Big Josie's relationship with Hester. When dialoguing with Catwoman and the ghost of Joseph, Hester indicates she is affected by Big Josie's abandonment of her at such an early age (Carr, 1998, pp. 59-63). She is at the same time emotional and bitter about Big Josie, and such an act of desertion can be considered the first violence imposed on her. Her conflicting emotions are reinforced by a mixture of resentment and attachment, as she hints at an anxiety that her mother might return to save her: "[HESTER] And I watched her walk away from me across the Bog of Cats. And across the Bog of Cats I'll watch her return" (p. 42). That bittersweet view of her mother also prevents her from allowing others to criticize Big Josie, as is the case of one of the arguments between Hester and Xavier Cassidy -

for as he attempts to belittle Big Josie and her "tinker ways" and Hester remembers that her mother was the only person she had, a reminiscent fear of abandonment that followed her throughout her life can be identified[10]. Big Josie's portrayal in the narrative defies a notion of ideal or traditional motherhood due to revisited themes of desertion and alcoholism, she is still the only figure representative of parental love that Hester knows, and their connection is established through singing. This is reflected in Hester's relationship with Josie as well, in which she is shown to invest love, while being unable to express it until she succumbs at the climatic point.

One of the ways in which she relates to Josie, then, is expressed through identity pride. In spite of their Traveller origins and connection with the caravan culture and the bog, thus experiencing prejudice, they resist by maintaining their communal space. Both Hester and Josie suffer from this, particularly by the actions of Mrs. Kilbride, who decidedly excludes them

> MRS KILBRIDE: Ya got some of it right. Ya got the 'Josie' part right, but ya got the 'Kilbride' part wrong, because you're not a Kilbride. You're a Swane. Can ya spell Swane? Of course ya can't. You're Hester Swane's little bastard. You're not a Kilbride and never will be (Carr, 1998, p. 25).

Similarly, Mrs. Kilbride demeans Hester in a wedding ceremony: "I've had the measure of you this long time, the lazy shiftless blood in ya, that savage tinker eye ya turn on people to frighten them –" (p. 54). Such are some instances of the violence employed against Hester grounded in exclusion and the engendering of a sense of not belonging that are repeated throughout the play. For instance, putting a gun to her throat, Xavier states, "Won't I now? Think ya'll outwit me with your tinker ways and –" as the stage direction concludes diegetically with "*A struggle, a few blows, he wins this bout*", subtly and figuratively indicating that he managed to fulfil his threat to sexually

[10] In the argument, Hester lashes out: "If you're tryin' to destroy some high idea I have of her you're wastin' your time. I've spent long hours of all the long years thinkin' about her. There isn't a situation I haven't imagined her in. I've lived through every mood there is to live concernin' her. Sure there was a time I hated her and wished the worst for her, but I've taught meself to rise above all that is cruel and unworthy in me thinkin' about her. So don't you think your five shillin' hoor stories will ever change me opinion of her. I have memories your cheap talk can never alter" (Carr, 1998, p. 70).

assault her (p. 71, author's emphasis). Through that display of violence, he reinforces prejudice and disdain against Traveller groups and also enables the materialization of the most evident violence against Hester in the narrative. By threatening to rape her, he demonstrates his power in the community to silence a woman, and this is allowed because they see her as an evil outsider and a witch, as Mrs. Kilbride repeatedly expresses (p. 32). The deed is allowed and forgiven in that the morality of the community frames Hester as wanton; a heritage stemming from her mother's image, who was alcoholic and represented as harmful to the good manners of a Catholic, traditional community. Hester expresses never feeling at home in the settled community to which she moved with Carthage, and she only stays there because it is still by the Bog of Cats, the place where she was born and will end her days. Nevertheless, she resists the violence, and stands by her "tinker" heritage and her rights as a woman and a mother: "If he thinks he can go on treatin' me the way he's been treatin' me, he's another thing comin'. I'm not to be flung aside at his biddin'. He'd be nothin' today if it wasn't for me" (Carr, 1998, p. 16).

Hester's husband Carthage can be considered her utmost aggressor and oppressor. An ambitious man who is almost a decade younger than her, Carthage is said to have chased her down in her caravan and insisted on having her by his side. Since then and for fourteen years, Hester has served to give him support, money, and a daughter. However, he then finds a younger woman who can give him more land and proceeds to quickly abandon his family and propose to her. Desertion becomes imminent once more, but a slower and more gradual suffering is imposed on her in that he leads her to a life within a society that is morally bound to not accept her, and displacement is the result of such mistreatment. Carthage subsequently tries to move her away from the bog:

> HESTER: No, I want to stay in me own house. Just let me stay in the house, Carthage. I won't bother anywan if yees'd just lave me alone. I was born on the Bog of Cats, same as all of yees, though ya'd never think it the way yees shun me. I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue. I could lead yees around the Bog of Cats in me sleep.

> CARTHAGE: There's a house bought and furnished for ya in town as ya agreed to –
> HESTER: I've never lived in a town. I won't know anywan there – (Carr, 1998, p. 56).

This, along with threatening to take out her time with their daughter, pushes Hester to violence and builds the plot progression towards the pressure that results in her isolation and death.

So, on the other hand, we have Hester's response to a whole life of violence and intimidation, followed by abandonment. It is also relevant to notice that Hester's instability and violence seems to have been previously noticed by others, and as stated by Catwoman, who hints that she would "bring this place down by evenin'" (Carr, 1998, p. 20). The same way her mother had problems with drinking and smoking, walking around the bog for nights on end, she is predisposed to a similar behavior, especially after Carthage leaves her. But her violence is not a rare instance in the narrative, and like Medea, she kills her brother in favor of the man she loved. Unlike the myth, however, her husband helps her perform the deed, and she feels as though violence provides them with an enduring bond. She perceives this darkness within her, as she tells Xavier Cassidy that his impulse to kill those who are between him and his goal is mirrored in her (p. 70). Then there are three events that serve as a chain of violent acts that encapsulate that layer of Hester's persona: setting the house on fire, killing Josie, and the suicide at the end.

The first manifests as an act of vandalism and operates through frustration over Carthage leaving and taking Josie with him. This is portrayed as a desperate act from a woman that has witnessed something she dearly loves and knows is being taken from her. Her rage, therefore, is prompted by the village and Carthage's insistence that she leaves her house and moves to a seemingly ideal town house her former husband had arranged for her – to live alone and away from her known place. Connected to this is the awareness that the violent act is a way to harm Carthage's obsession with money and power, as she destroys everything he cared about in her vengeful state. As Carthage's

ambitious goals are what ruined her life, it seems fair for her to hurt his pride, as can be seen in the following passage:

> HESTER: Take her then, take her, ya've taken everythin' else. In me stupidity I thought ya'd lave me Josie. I should've known ya always meant to take her too.
> [...]
> CARTHAGE: She's after burnin' all the livestock, the house, the sheds in ruins. I'm away up there now to see what can be salvaged. G'wan back home, I'll be there in a while (Carr, 1998, p. 75).

Josie's assassination becomes then a way for Hester to both hurt Carthage and protect herself and - through Hester's own indications - her daughter from such a violent separation. The play adapts the Medean archetype and can point to the contextual situation of female Irish citizens during the years of national development. Therefore, the issue with killing Josie is, controversially, the idea of saving her. As previously pointed out, the violence that Hester undergoes for being part of the Traveller culture and not having her mother to protect her are the same that would be imposed over Josie as she is left with Carthage and Caroline. Additionally, she would be exposed to Xavier, who is a prominent agent of violence in the play, and Carthage ultimately does not show care for her, manipulating Hester to keep the two apart - instances of male violence that is inflicted upon female characters of the play. To those instances is added the fact that she would suffer prejudice from being a "half tinker" and the "bastard of a Swane", whilst having no one to protect her, which creates narrative undertones of isolation and exclusion that are the driving force behind the dramatically climactic deed of infanticide in the play.

Finally, it is worth noting a return to the beginning, with the death of the black swan. As Mary Trotter (2008) summarizes, "The death of the swan, frozen into the bog it was unable to fly away from, reflects Hester's own psychic entrapment within this community" (p. 188). This is reflected through Hester's connection with the swan, as she was put in its nest as a baby, played with it as a child, and was said by her mother to live as long as the swan itself would. The trail of blood that opens the play is similar to the one that closes it, and as their lives are bonded, it can be considered a foreshadowing of the end. To Hester, suicide was a way out of the reality that constantly

oppressed her, established almost as a grim *deus ex machina* of Medea, and serves as a final escape from being a woman and a foreigner trapped in a community that morally outcast her. Her displays of violence, culminating in her suicide, are evidence of how complex are the layers of thematic connection between violence and liberation in *By the Bog of Cats*…. From a contemporary feminist point of view, the play subverts the initial appeal of the archetype by placing the violent woman in a position of self-sacrifice and resistance against ostracization and gender-based violence.

4. Conclusion

By the Bog of Cats… reconfigures the longstanding Medean tale of female violence within the 1990s Irish backdrop of the play, through a conflict between settled and indigenous communities in the rural Midlands. As aforementioned, women had few rights in regards to marriage and employment at that time, so they depended on male-driven institutional and social decisions to develop family life and nurture their children. To those who stand outside strict spectra of religious morality, however, this was not allowed – circumstances akin to Hester's. She is the Other, the outsider and the witch in the eyes of the settled community in which she was inserted through marriage, and for that she holds even fewer rights over her own body, her geographical freedom and her sense of belonging. Violence is, then, a last resource in order to escape from such an oppressive structure into a stabler one, and that movement is peppered with instances of violence. Her figure becomes increasingly rejected throughout the three acts of the play as she descends into ostracism and discrimination and becomes herself a perpetrator of violence as a result.

Her attachment to Carthage, as explained, seems to be a reaction to the fear of abandonment she faces since her mother left her in the bog. Her dialogues with Catwoman, the ghost of Joseph, and even Xavier Cassidy demonstrate the toll of the desertion she suffered. The rage comes from the abandonment and it engenders the need to experience the love she did not have from Big Josie, whose name becomes a trigger

of violent outbursts throughout. The mood of resentment expressed by the character also influences her relationship with her daughter, as they are connected by the bog and by music as much as she was with her mother. Her murderous impulse, however, reflects an absence of the love that Big Josie was not apt to display. Josie's sacrifice is a dramatic offering to save her from a dark life she would be condemned to for being a woman and a "tinker" in that community.

Therefore, the postcolonial feminist reading of subversion is followed closely by Gothic notions of Other and abjection. Like other recreations of Medea made by women, especially during the 20th century, the play tends to present itself as a subversive narrative that disrupts a sense of gender norms and normalcy. Revenge as a plot-driven instrument for the return of the oppressed is fundamental to the construction of the drama. In addition, self-sacrifice and violence are ways to occupy a place of imposition that being a female outsider did not grant her in the settled community. As a critique of Irish laws over marriage and female agency, the play works with the development of a female character who, besides reacting to the aggression she is subjected to, is portrayed to make autonomous - albeit violent - decisions.

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