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***Kill Like Medea, but with Love this Time:  
Marina Carr's Take on Filicide in  
By the Bog of Cats***

**Dimitris Kentrotis-Zinelis**

d.kentrotis.zinelis@hum.leidenuniv.nl

## **Kill Like Medea, but with Love this Time: Marina Carr's Take on Filicide in *By the Bog of Cats***

***Dimitris Kentrotis-Zinelis***

*Leiden University*

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This paper discusses Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, an Irish theatrical play that is a loose adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. Originally staged at the Abbey Theatre on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1998, *By the Bog of Cats* is Marina Carr's most renowned and oft-performed theatrical play today. Carr borrows and reworks the deadly myth of Medea, namely the story of a mother who kills her children as a form of revenge against her husband. Carr transposes the myth to the rural Midlands of Ireland, bringing a tragedy originally performed in 431 BC to a contemporary Irish setting.<sup>1</sup> Placed into this new context, what stands out in Carr's adaptation in relation to the ancient precursor is Carr's profound take on filicide. Leaving aside notions of retribution and jealousy typically assigned to *Medea*, filicide, in Carr's hands, transforms into a radically liberating force.

The aim of this paper is to exhibit in detail how Carr casts filicide in a new, sympathetic light. Carr presents a Medea-inspired heroine, Hester Swane, who commits filicide not as a means to punish a third party, as Medea does to Jason in the Euripidean tragedy, but as an absolute end in itself: as a feminine cry for self-liberation and self-definition. As such, by appropriating the myth of Medea but changing the sex of the murdered children from male to female, Carr alters the premise under which filicide takes place. In particular, while Medea's killing of her two boys is spurred on by the suffering that this deed will cause their father, Hester is driven by altruistic motives. Hester redefines the grounds on which filicide takes place, to the extent that Hester's crime comes to be understood as an act of 'ultimate love': Hester kills her daughter Josie so that she can be spared from the same tortures that Hester endured all her life. In so doing, Hester redefines an

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<sup>1</sup>*By the Bog of Cats* is customarily introduced and evaluated as part of Carr's 'Midlands trilogy', together with *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996); all three plays take place in a rural environment of the Irish Midlands and have as main protagonists strong-willed female characters sharing the same insatiable longing for 'a lost other', and who eventually meet the same tragic fate.

idealised conception of motherhood, one in which maternal care extends to power over the very life or death of one's child.

By rendering filicide a shocking yet valid aspect of motherhood, Carr actively forges new models of female subjectivity, liberated from the traditional patriarchal assignment of fixed gender roles and hierarchies. One subsequently understands the creation of a new space 'renegotiating limiting cultural notions of "woman" as idealized Mother-figure and symbol of nation and addressing issues of sexuality, gender, and the body'.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, filicide in *By the Bog of Cats* is a mother-daughter thing. As Karin Maresh argues:

The most prevalent theme running through the play is the importance of the bond between mother and daughter, which marks a significant change from Irish drama such as Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, where relationships between women are always circumvented by the playwright's focus on the father-son relationships, or the women's relationships to the men in their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Going against the grain of the way in which familial relationships are depicted on the Irish stage, Carr's Medea figure must kill a daughter, not sons. This change is crucial, as it exposes a whole new significance to the act of filicide. As Gülsen Sayin writes:

Carr's play challenges the social construction of identity with a powerful account of a mother-daughter bond. Carr shifts the focus of the original myth from stereotypical feminine sexual jealousy and female wickedness [...] to the deeper layers of the feminine unconscious as well as construction of feminine subjectivity and identity, symbiotically connected with a lost m/other. In other words, Carr rewrites the myth of Medea from a woman's perspective this time.<sup>4</sup>

By rewriting the myth of Medea from a woman's perspective, Carr delivers an altogether different female heroine, as Hester resists the tag of the murderous mother for which Medea is notorious. Hester sees death not as a form of revenge but as an escape route, bitterly realising that this is the only way for her and her daughter to remain united. Unlike the Euripidean Medea, who escapes on a dragon chariot after committing the wicked deed, Carr's heroine escorts her daughter in the journey to the Underworld.

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<sup>2</sup> Melissa Sihra, 'Greek Myth, Irish Reality: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*', in *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today*, ed. by John Dillon, and S. E. Wilmer (London: Methuen, 2005), pp. 115–35 (p. 133).

<sup>3</sup> Karin Maresh, 'Un/Natural Motherhood in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats*', *Theatre History Studies*, 35.1 (2016), 179–96 (pp. 189–90).

<sup>4</sup> Gülsen Sayin, 'Quest for the lost M/Other: Medea Re-Constructed in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*', *Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 9.1 (2008), 75–87 (pp. 77–78).

Through a close reading of *By the Bog of Cats*, this paper will delve into an exploration of the three main strands of oppression that compel Hester to grab the knife: Hester's outsider status as an Irish Traveller, patriarchal rule, and maternal abandonment. While Hester's trauma of maternal abandonment is not an oppressive act *per se*, still it is the by-product of the other two forms of oppression, as Hester's mother abandoned her to escape the deep-seated patriarchal control of women and the alienation of Travellers embedded in the fabric of the Bog of Cats society, the same forces which Hester resists in the play. These forces comprise an intricate nexus of control and submission that prohibits Hester and Josie from living autonomous lives, built on their own terms and values. By revealing these undercurrents, I argue that Carr radically inverts filicide as a conceivable and even justifiable act of maternal responsibility, if only as a last resort under difficult and limited conditions.

The play is set in an imaginary bogland called the Bog of Cats, reminiscent of the rural landscape of the Irish Midlands. There, Hester Swane 'leads the ultimate unsettled life: she is a tinker, an itinerant who roams the bog'.<sup>5</sup> In her forties, Hester is an Irish Traveller, and therefore a member of an itinerant population living a nomadic, caravan life in the Midlands of Ireland, resisting permanent confinement within a specific, settled place.<sup>6</sup> In a nutshell, according to Bruce Stewart, Hester 'embodies autochthonous Irishness — mythic, marginalized, and explosive'.<sup>7</sup> Carr herself has confessed that she 'chose to make [Hester] a Traveller because Travellers are our national outsiders', thus underlining the resemblance which Hester has to Medea's 'Other', barbarian identity.<sup>8</sup> As Melissa Sihra writes:

Just as Medea will always be a foreigner in Corinth, Carr reveals how her central female protagonist will always be excluded from the dominant fabric of Irish society: as a marginalized indigenous people whose language and traditions can be traced as far back as the twelfth century, Irish Travellers are commonly associated with bigoted stereotypes of ignorance, violence and lack of cleanliness, perpetuating essentialist notions of innate impurity.<sup>9</sup>

Although unmarried (like Medea), Hester has a seven-year-old daughter named Josie, together with her partner, Carthage Kilbride (a Jason-like figure). Hester and Carthage have spent almost fifteen years living together, and apparently Hester prides herself on their

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Russell, 'Talking with Ghosts of Irish Playwrights Past: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*', *Comparative Drama*, 40.2 (2006), 149–68 (p. 155).

<sup>6</sup> Travellers were given formal recognition as a distinct ethnic group within the Irish State only in 2017, marking a constitutional end to their endemic persecution.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart Bruce, 'A Fatal Excess at the Heart of Irish Atavism: review of Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*', *IASIL Newsletter*, 5.1 (1999), page span? (p. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Eileen Battersby, 'Marina of the Midlands', *Irish Times*, 4 May 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Sihra, p. 128.

relationship: ‘I’m not talkin’ about love. Love is for fools and children. Our bond is harder, like two rocks we are, grindin’ off of wan another and maybe all the closer for that’.<sup>10</sup> Truly, Carthage and Josie are the only family that Hester has ever known: having never met her father, Hester only has vague memories of her mother, Big Josie, who also left her, forcing Hester to raise herself. As an adult, Hester has almost no contact with the rest of the populace, apart from her neighbour Monica and the semi-deranged Catwoman — a choric figure in the play. Her support system is limited to her daughter and long-term partner.

However, reality is not as Hester projects it to be. Unbeknownst to her, Carthage is planning to desert her in order to marry the much younger Caroline Cassidy, daughter of Xavier Cassidy, a prosperous landowner. When Hester finds out, she interprets Carthage’s actions as a betrayal, telling him, ‘You’re sellin’ me and Josie down the river for a few lumpy auld acres and notions of respectability and I never thought ya would’ (p. 26). One could say that Carthage’s decision triggers for Hester the unresolved trauma of her mother’s departure from the Bog of Cats, and the sense of loss which she has had since then, as Hester sees another beloved person suddenly disappearing from her life. This outcome has immediate implications, as Brian Arkins explains that ‘Such a marriage will make Carthage respectable and the pillar of the community, whereas Hester, as a Traveller, is an outsider in Irish society — as Medea from Colchis was in Greece’.<sup>11</sup> Olwen Fouéré, the first actress to play Hester, elaborates:

Carthage is not just marrying another woman; he’s entering this land-grabbing, gombeen society. So that Hester’s rage is also a cultural rage, of a colonized culture which is being driven out, not allowed to exist, and where her sexuality and creativity are being suppressed.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between Hester and Carthage becomes a microcosm of the socioeconomic tensions within the contemporary Irish society in which Carr writes. Carr acknowledges in these two characters the competing forces expressed by two squarely opposed worldviews: that of the settled community and that of the Traveller community.

Yet, abandoning Hester for another woman and a *modus vivendi* does not suffice. Carthage’s past has to be completely wiped out if he is to be assimilated by the settled

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<sup>10</sup> Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Arkins, *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Olwen Fouéré, ‘Journeys in Performance: On Playing in *The Mai* and *By the Bog of Cats*’, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: Before Rules Was Made*, ed. by Cathy Leeney, and Anna McMullan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), pp. 160–71 (pp. 169–70).

community, meaning that Hester must be erased at all costs. As Hester exclaims, ‘the truth is you want to eradicate me, make out I never existed’ (p. 51). Urged by his mother Mrs Kilbride, Carthage comes to Hester on his wedding day and tells her that he wants her ‘out of here before dusk’ (p. 28), and that people think ‘it’s time ya moved onto another haltin’ site’ (p. 27). Carthage also announces that Josie will remain under his guard given his reliability as a settled, connected person, part of a fixed society. He accuses Hester of binge drinking and parental neglect: ‘I only have to mention your drinkin’ or your night roamin’ or the way ya sleep in that dirty auld caravan and lave Josie alone in the house’ (p. 27). Hester does not buckle under the pressure of these threats, but retaliates against such attempts to ostracize her. She vigorously defends her right to reside within the Bog of Cats, claiming that banishment will mean death for her and Josie: ‘Ah, how can I lave the Bog of Cats, everythin’ I’m connected to is here. I’d rather die’ (p. 11) and, later, ‘I’m warnin’ ya now, Carthage, you go through this sham weddin’ and you’ll never see Josie again’ (p. 27). Hester’s warning to Carthage both cements her strong sense of belonging to the Bog of Cats, and also threatens filicide as an act of self-preservation, an idea which solidifies as the play progresses.

Unsurprisingly, the first line of attack against Hester is based on her Traveller status. The tag of ‘tinker’, a derogatory word that constantly pops up in the play, is a clear sign of this discrimination.<sup>13</sup> For instance, Mrs Kilbride’s declaration that ‘I warned him about that wan, Hester Swane, that she’d get her claws in, and she did, the tinker’ (p. 17), sums up the prevalent prejudice against Hester, based simply on her refusal to follow the settled community’s etiquette. On another occasion, Mrs Kilbride accuses Travellers of being mentally inferior: ‘Thick and stubborn and dangerous wrong-headed and backwards to top it all’ (p. 15). Nevertheless, Hester is unashamed of her status as a Traveller and exhibits her defiance against the townsfolk’s prejudice as she tells them ‘Thinks yees all Hester Swane with her tinker blood is gettin’ no more than she deserves’ (p. 6), expressing her anger at their indifference to her proposed banishment from the Bog of Cats.

In fact, Hester does not expect to be assimilated by the settled Irish community, but only expects her footing as a Traveller to be respected:

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<sup>13</sup> The word comes from the old Irish *Tinceard* meaning ‘tin craft’. At first, a ‘tinker’ was a wandering craftsperson moving from door to door to make their living. However, the meaning of the word has changed over time, and now a tinker is someone who follows an unsettled life. As Gladwin notes: ‘Tinkers have been historically connected to the bogs because these open landscapes have been left to rot and the bog therefore provides them freedom from persecution’. See Derek Gladwin, ‘Staging the Trauma of the Bog in Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*’, *Irish Studies Review*, 19.4 (2011), 387–400 (p. 395).

I was born on the Bog of Cats and on the Bog of Cats I'll end my days. I've as much right to this place as any of ye, more, for it holds me to it in ways it has never held ye. And as for my tinker blood, I'm proud of it. It gives me an edge over all of ye around here, allows me see ye for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower ye are. (p. 27)

The Bog of Cats is for Hester a protracted yet indispensable feature of her identity; it is simultaneously a safehouse and a place of self-formation. Removing Hester from the Bog, therefore, removes her also from her source of selfhood. As a result, Hester distances herself from her rivals by appealing to her 'tinker blood', an unmistakable reference to a diverse ethos and set of norms distinguishing Irish Travellers from mainstream society's cultural practices.<sup>14</sup> Hester displays cultural differences through her hybrid condition of being a foreigner-native; she is not a total stranger to the Midlands community, but she nonetheless remains largely unwelcome, being compelled to live a life on the fringes.

Aside from her Traveller identity, a corresponding way that Hester is portrayed as 'Other' by the settled community is through the trope of witchcraft. As Karen O'Brien writes, 'Hester's difference is interpreted as witchery, resembling Medea's characterization as a sorcerer'.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, Mrs Kilbride — echoing the usual stereotype of the witch — alleges to have seen Hester 'whooshin' by on her broom half an hour back' (p. 8). On another occasion, she refers to Hester as 'the Jezebel witch' (p. 17), while Monica reiterates the town gossip of Hester being involved with 'black-art things' (p. 61). This leitmotif of witch imagery is conspicuous throughout *By the Bog of Cats*, and is used most strikingly when Xavier Cassidy, invoking the witch-hunt practices usually attributed to the Middle Ages, curses Hester saying: 'You're a dangerous witch, Swane [...] A hundred year ago we'd strap ya to a stake and roast ya till your guts exploded' (p. 68). Thus, portraying Hester as a witch becomes a convenient way for the male leaders of the community to justify their aggression towards her.

With this witch purge rhetoric, Carr seeks to demonstrate the inability of the dominant Irish community to understand or eventually tolerate certain liminal lifestyles and behaviours outside the unwritten rules of social organization and coexistence. Hester's position outside

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Hayes elaborates on the main reasons behind Travellers' banishment from the inner nucleus of Irish society: 'This racism, like sedentarism, is rooted in the belief that the way of life of Travellers is an anachronism and a throwback to a less civilised era in Irish history. It is this racism [...] that is at the root of the economic, social and geographical exclusion of Travellers from Irish society'. See Michael Hayes, *Irish Travellers: Representation and Realities* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2007) p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Karen O'Brien, 'Re-envisioning "Woman": Medea as Heroine in Versions by Brendan Kennelly and Marina Carr', *Études littéraires*, 37.1 (2012), 157–72 (p. 167).

of the cultural standards of the Midlands community render her an object of fear and threat, whose imminent annihilation is in the public interest. Consequently, Hester's reputation as a *persona non grata*, a foreigner with knowledge of witchcraft and powers of sorcery, embodies the threat that a deviant individual poses to an organized group. It is this non-conformity that brands Hester a witch, rather than any demonstrated magic powers. Catwoman, another pariah of the Bog of Cats society, tells her, 'You're my match in witchery, Hester, same as your mother was, it may even be ya surpass us both' (p. 11). It is not a coincidence that none of these three women are living a conventional life. By cheaply interpreting Hester's Traveller status as witchery, the dominant members of their society attempt to restrain any influence Hester might exert in the Bog's domain.

This brings us to the second axis of oppression for Hester; namely, patriarchal rule, invoked when Carthage, Hester's long-term partner, decides to abandon Hester only after securing a deal with Xavier Cassidy, a rich farmer and land proprietor. In marrying Xavier's daughter, Carthage also inherits a part of his wealth. In essence, marrying Caroline is just the pretext for Carthage to greedily secure a better material life for himself. Within this scheme, Caroline is another victim of a patriarchal system that excludes women from decision-making and does not allow them to have control over their lives. Likewise, Hester finds herself entrapped in a situation of sheer exploitation, carefully orchestrated to subjugate women under male domination. In the Bog of Cats universe, female characters like Hester or Caroline — whether they choose to rebel against it or passively accept its commands — are nonetheless detrimentally affected by a male-dominated status quo.

To be fully effective, such patriarchal regimes impose their own strict rules. In the Midlands, this rule is closely linked with land ownership. To show how land possession serves as an instrument of patriarchal oppression, Carr propels two mutually-exclusive theories regarding the interaction that the Irish locals have with the land of the Bog. One could label these conflicting perspectives in traditional, gendered terms. The 'masculine' perspective would be the dominant members of the settled community such as Xavier Cassidy, Carthage's aspiration and the motivation for his marriage, and even women such as Mrs Kilbride, who, for the sake of their personal interests, have sided with these dominant men. For those sharing this perspective, ownership of land follows capitalist conventions: a hereditary system of lordship over the land and a contract-based scheme of exchange where land translates directly into currency. The 'feminine' viewpoint, on the other hand, is principally shared by unsettled inhabitants of the Bog such as Hester Swane, the quasi-



deranged Catwoman, and men from the settled community who fail to sustain their prescribed role. One such man is Father Willow, an erratic priest with a soft spot for women and booze, who, when asked to say the grace in Carthage's wedding, outrageously retorts: 'The grace, yes, how does it go again?' (p. 48). These outsiders share the belief that land ownership is essentially measured according to the amount of freedom of movement which one has within its premises, and the extent of familiarity one has with the land, its flora, and its fauna.

Reflective of this split, there is a fundamental difference between how male and female characters associate themselves with the land. As H  l  ne Lecossois writes:

The land Hester belongs to is wild, untamed and is no-one's property; the land Xavier is interested in is tilled farmland. An opposition between two conflicting sets of values is thus uncovered and points to one of the play's major tensions. Archaic values embodied by Hester and Catwoman, whose name highlights the strong tie that unites her to the Bog of Cats, stand in sharp contrast to more recent, mercantile values in which Xavier, and Carthage for that matter, believe.<sup>16</sup>

For the men of the Bog of Cats, the land of the Bog translates to property rights, contracts, and the amount of profit per number of acres. According to Xavier, a proponent of this scheme, to sign a paper in order to possess some land is the only ticket to legitimacy. He tells Carthage, 'There's nothin' besides land, boy, nothin'! A real farmer would never think otherwise' (p. 69). Yet the underlying greed behind this ostensible supremacy of legal procedures is always present. Xavier correctly predicts that Carthage 'loves the land and like me he'd rather die than part with it wance he gets his greedy hands on it' (p. 65). Still, legality does not always imply morality, as evidenced by the actions of the settled members of the Bog of Cats. Mrs Kilbride sarcastically reassures Josie, 'Don't you worry, child, we'll get ya off of her yet. Me and your daddy has plans. We'll batter ya into the semblance of legitimacy, soon as we get ya off' (p. 18). Of course, Mrs Kilbride's plan is Hester's eradication, predicated on her illegitimacy in the community due to her lack of land ownership. The logic behind Hester's banishment from the Midlands community is that, since Hester does not legally possess any land, she has no legal grounds to inhabit the space.

In contrast, Hester's notion of land ownership is based on which individual has the most inherent knowledge of the land, its geography, wildlife, and peculiar natural features. Hester justifies and ranks the right of belonging to the Bog of Cats according to who knows

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<sup>16</sup> H  l  ne Lecossois, 'From Medea to Hester Swane: Marina Carr's Rewriting of Ethos in *By the Bog of Cats*', in *Drama Reinvented: Theatre Adaptation in Ireland (1970–2007)*, ed. by Thierry Dubost (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 67–82 (p. 75).

best the morphology and vegetation of the area. When questioned about why she has a claim over the Bog, she asserts that:

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. (pp. 50–51)

Hester profoundly scorns any type of official arrangements, preferring instead a natural entitlement to the land in which she dwells. She questions the value of legal contracts, saying, ‘Bits of paper, writin’, means nothin’, can as aisy be unsinged’ (p. 20). Hester cannot digest that bureaucracy and an inherently-unfair system of real estate has utterly destroyed the original affinity of people with their ancestral land and its surrounding environment. Hester considers that she has a natural right to stay in the Bog of Cats, and instead of owning a specific piece of land herself, feels instead that she herself belongs to all of the Bog. As Erica Cerquoni notes:

Hester’s association mainly with open or unfixed spaces [such as the Bog] seems to suggest a whole reconceptualization of the notion of home/homeland for female characters. This new idea moves on from a restrictive notion of indoors as a ‘natural space’ for women characters, and embraces placelessness and displacement not as the absence of place or as the wrong place, but as an alternative kind of ‘placement’.<sup>17</sup>

Hester’s disobedience to the limited position which she is predestined to occupy within the Bog undermines the foundations of the patriarchal system of values. Her staunch rejection of a circumscribed, indoor life, and subsequent embrace of placelessness and displacement as a legitimate lifestyle, pose major threats to the traditional, masculine Midlands society that surrounds her. Since her radical behaviour cannot be regulated, Hester instantly becomes a target to be exterminated. Hester’s special connection with the land of the Bog is not as absurd as Carthage or Xavier would like to portray it. Conversely, it is paradigmatic of a different, and arguably more egalitarian, understanding of societal organization.

However, Hester’s compulsion to prove that her love for the Bog is greater than anyone else’s indicates even stronger underlying reasons that compel her to stand her ground. I would argue that this underlying anxiety is derived from the third factor informing Hester’s filicide: her prior maternal abandonment. When Hester was seven — the same age as her

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<sup>17</sup> Erica Cerquoni, ‘One Bog, Many Bogs: Theatrical Space, Visual Image, and Meaning in Some Productions of Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*’, in *The Theatre of Marina Carr: Before Rules Was Made*, eds. Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), pp. 172–99 (p. 182).

daughter in the play — she was abandoned by her mother, Big Josie, a woman known for being larger than life, if irresponsible. As Xavier described her:

She'd go off for days with anywan who'd buy her a drink. She'd be off in the bars of Pullagh and Mucklagh getting' into fights [and] wance she bit the nose off a woman who dared to look at her man. (p. 32)

However, the underlying truth is that Big Josie was also the victim of the same oppression that Hester suffers. Xavier illustrates his low opinion of her, saying, 'We often breathed the same air, me and Josie Swane, she was a loose wan, loose and lazy and aisy, a five-shillin' hoor' (p. 66). This is another characteristic example in the play of a male character with power and influence derogatively addressing a woman by calling her a whore, simply because she does not fulfil the community's set behavioural standards. As such, escaping from the Bog of Cats was the only viable option for Big Josie, leaving Hester to be raised alone.

Hester has never come to terms with the reality of her abandonment and is possessed by vain hopes that her mother will eventually return one day to the Bog of Cats and reunite with her:

Ya know the last time I seen me mother I was wearin' me Communion dress too, down by the caravan, a beautiful summer's night and the bog like a furnace. I wouldn't go to bed though she kept tellin' me to. I don't know why I wouldn't, I always done what she told me. I think now — maybe I knew. And she says, 'I'm goin' walkin' the bog, you're to stay here, Hetty.' And I says, 'No,' I'd go along with her, and made to folly her. And she says, 'No, Hetty, you wait here, I'll be back in a while.' And again I made to folly her and again she stopped me. 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. 34)

Hester's inability to overcome the maternal neglect that she endured becomes more apparent when her last line of defense against her eviction from the community relates once again to Big Josie's supposed return. Hester no longer cares about Carthage's wedding, but merely begs to be allowed to remain peacefully at her dwelling-place until her mother returns:

I can't lave — Ya see me mother said she'd come back here. Father Willow, tell them what they're doin' is wrong. They'll listen to you. [...] I can't go till me mother comes. I'd hoped she'd come before now and it wouldn't come to this. Don't make me lave or somethin' terrible'll happen. Don't. [...] I've swallyed all me pride over you. You're lavin' me no choice but a vicious war against ya. (pp. 52–53)

Evidently, the site of the Bog functions as a landmark that is directly implicated in Hester's trauma of maternal abandonment. Though unconsciously, the landscape of the Bog preserves the memory of Hester's mother. She confesses to her neighbour, Monica, 'It's still like she only walked away yesterday' (p. 61). Hester believes she can still follow Big Josie's legacy, if she remains within the Bog, which validates her relentless wandering all over the landscape and her unyielding insistence to remain within its limits.

In fact, the vain hope that her mother will return if she remains in the Bog of Cats has a second reading: being evicted from the Bog would seal Hester's abandonment as permanent, since her mother would not know where to find her should she reappear. Captivatingly, Hester's persistent recollection of her lost mother resembles the properties of the Bog: given the muddy and semi-solid consistency of a bog, its apparent nebulous stagnancy contrasted with the co-existence of overlapping layers of age-old earth in constant flux, the Bog serves as a memorial to that which in reality is lost but is kept simultaneously alive in memory: a boundless repository of historical, cultural, and personal trauma. As Gladwin notes:

Hester depends upon the bog to reincarnate the memory of her remote past, in the hope that her mother will indeed come back to her. [...] She has memorialised her mother by creating an alternative reality of *what if* rather than *what is*.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, the Bog has acquired mythological properties for Hester: in lieu of Big Josie's physical reappearance, the Bog has been transformed into a symbolic imprint of her anticipated return. This return remains hypothetical throughout the play, however, and Hester keeps wandering *ad infinitum*.

Consequently, as Hester finds herself facing eviction from the Bog, she fears that the pattern of maternal abandonment will repeat again in her seven-year-old daughter's life, as Hester would be forced to leave her behind with her father. Her daughter confirms this fear, telling Hester, 'I'd be watchin' for ya all the time 'long the Bog of Cats. I'd be hopin' and waitin' and prayin' for ya to return' (p. 75). This moment also coincides with Hester finally coming to terms with her own neglect at the hands of Big Josie and realising that her mother will never come back. Informed by her own alienation and trauma, it seems to Hester that her obligation as a mother is for her and Josie to leave the Bog of Cats together, willingly, before Carthage separates them by force. And yet, Hester cannot merely leave with Josie because of their inextricable sense of belonging to the Bog of Cats, and because the settled community,

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<sup>18</sup> Gladwin, p. 393.

to which Josie in part belongs through her father, would not allow it. Hester feels that if she disappears from the landscape of the Bog, she will vanish entirely — an outcome not much different from the fate which she finally chooses for herself and her daughter.

Anxious to protect her daughter from the same hardship by breaking the vicious circle of maternal neglect, Hester acts determinedly:

HESTER    Alright, alright! Shhh! (*Picks her up.*) it's alright, I'll take ya with me, I won't have ya as I was, waitin' a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don't, Josie, they don't. It's alright. Close your eyes.

*Josie closes her eyes.*

HESTER    Are they closed tight?

JOSIE       Yeah.

*Hester cuts Josie's throat in one savage movement.*

JOSIE       (*softly*) Mam — Mam — (*And Josie dies in Hester's arms*) (p. 75)

Hester comes to fully acknowledge her experience of maternal abandonment only when she realizes that Josie's life is destined to run the same course. As Jordan writes, 'Hester slays her daughter and it is a curiously protective device. Hester knows her own pain and can articulate her mother's absence as the principal source of it'.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the bitter truth that has been kept for so long in the realm of the unconscious has finally come to light. Hester eventually accepts the truth of her trauma and how this has shaped her and, in doing so, also understands the real cause of her misery as patriarchal control over women. Facing this system and a sense of its inevitability, Hester concludes that Josie must never experience the same constraints, which she certainly would do if left in the Bog under her father's care. However, the death that Hester chooses for herself and her daughter is an altogether different form of escape from Big Josie's exit. As Hester never wanted to leave the Bog of Cats, she uses the properties of the Bog as a landscape of living memory to achieve a perpetual belonging within the landscape, allowing her and Josie to 'live on' even after death.

Holding these circumstances up against Euripides' *Medea*, Carr redefines the grounds on which the killing of a child by their mother takes place. Though shocking and

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<sup>19</sup> Jordan, p. 249. This is the first reference to Jordan, needs full reference.

unconventional, Josie's murder can be understood as an act of 'ultimate love'. O'Brien writes:

Hester's killing of Josie overall emphasizes the mother-daughter bond, whereas Medea's murder of her two sons is a subversive act to destroy the father-son bond and relegate Jason to the broken emotional state of the perceived stereotype of woman [...] [This] 'act of ultimate love' affirms motherhood while showing a performance of maternity that is wildly at variance with 'traditional' ideas of acceptable motherly characteristics.<sup>20</sup>

What is exceptional about Hester is that even after killing Josie, she nonetheless perceives their bond as indestructible, as if they will keep being united for eternity, and that their mutual death is the only assurance of this type of freedom. Hester Swane tests the boundaries of traditional motherhood and, while she commits an abominable crime, she nonetheless possesses a discernible moral apparatus in doing so. Hester's sentiments towards her mother, her daughter, and the Bog are interconnected and virtually unbreakable, and when she bitterly realizes that they have all been put in jeopardy, she takes up arms and defends herself with whatever means she has left.

One final indication that Hester's filicide should be evaluated differently than Medea's comes from Hester's dying words, which, curiously enough, are the same as her daughter's: 'Mam — Mam —' (p. 77). In her final moments, Hester invokes Big Josie, a maternal absence that has never been replaced, but nonetheless firmly defines her. The fact that Hester's child Josie utters the same final words, from within her mother's arms, stresses Hester's unfaltering commitment to her. Unlike Big Josie, Hester is not a lost mother but remains steadfastly present to the end of her daughter's life. With this in mind, Carr's profound study of the mother-daughter relationship in *By the Bog of Cats* comes to a close. The (dis)connection which Hester has had all her life with her mother, along with the immediate motherly action she must take to safeguard her daughter against the very same destiny, render filicide a shocking yet somehow valid aspect of motherhood. The once-abandoned, motherless daughter, having now become a mother herself, strenuously repudiates the same outcome for her own daughter. Thus, Hester and Josie's tautological deaths decisively contribute to the fortification of this inseparable, distinctively female bond between a mother and a daughter. As such, by replacing Medea's two sons with a daughter, Carr moves away from the typical Medean tale of female jealousy and revenge, proposing instead a positive story of female preservation and connection.

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<sup>20</sup> O'Brien, p. 168.

To conclude, by borrowing, reworking, and transposing the themes of *Medea* to the rural Midlands of Ireland, Carr does not produce a duplicate story. Instead, Carr's *Medea*, Hester Swane, is shown to be motivated by entirely different motives than her ancient precursor. Hester kills Josie because she wants to protect her from the prospect of a terrible life within the claustrophobic Bog of Cats society. Otherwise, as Hester knows from bitter experience, Josie's life is set to follow the same doomed path as her own. Therefore, Hester's crime is by no means instigated by blind jealousy, as is the case with *Medea*, but can be understood as a desperate act of 'ultimate love'. Carr transforms filicide into a radically liberating force, one motivated by Hester's experience of oppression as a result of her Traveller status, patriarchal rule over women, and her maternal abandonment. Hester has been a victim of all three interconnected mechanisms of oppression, and she is unable to escape from their influence. As Hester is defamed as a tinker and a witch, she is also mistreated by the male leaders of the settled community who plot to ostracize her from her birthplace, a space indelibly linked to her trauma of abandonment by her mother and the futile hope of her return. Curiously, the only power that remains in Hester's hands is to save her daughter from the same peril: Hester realizes that with their mutual death, she and Josie will break free from the yoke of abuse unfairly imposed on them. As a result, death is seen as a last but vital resort; a getaway from a life that is literally unliveable. Overall, in *By the Bog of Cats*, Carr succeeds in presenting a revolutionary take on filicide, one that upturns the greatest taboo of all, namely the murder of a child by their mother, by rendering such action as a viable part of motherhood. Hester kills her offspring like *Medea*, but unlike *Medea*, she follows her maternal instincts by doing so.

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