

Monstrosity and Motherhood: Visions of the Terrible Mother

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to answer the “*Medea* question”: what is it about monstrous mothers, starting with *Medea* and reappearing in countless other places, that is so continually relevant over the years, and in many different societies? Through examining the Greek *Medea*, Marina Carr’s *By The Bog of Cats*, and Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, I analyze anti-maternal women within their respective social contexts. I contend that the character of the monstrous mother has dual functionality. Firstly, she represents an attempt by female playwrights and contributors to reclaim a role that has been historically imposed upon them: the idea of motherhood as an obligation and a sacred duty. Secondly, to those in positions of privilege, these terrible mothers are an explosive threat to the very power structures they depend on to maintain that privilege. I utilize feminist theory, dramatic analysis, and historical and sociocultural frameworks to deconstruct - and then *reconstruct* - the terrible mother, and the enduring popularity and adaptability of the murderous *Medea*.

Keywords: anti-motherhood, Euripides, feminism, theater, monstrosity, patriarchy, *By the Bog of Cats*, *A Doll’s House*, *Medea*

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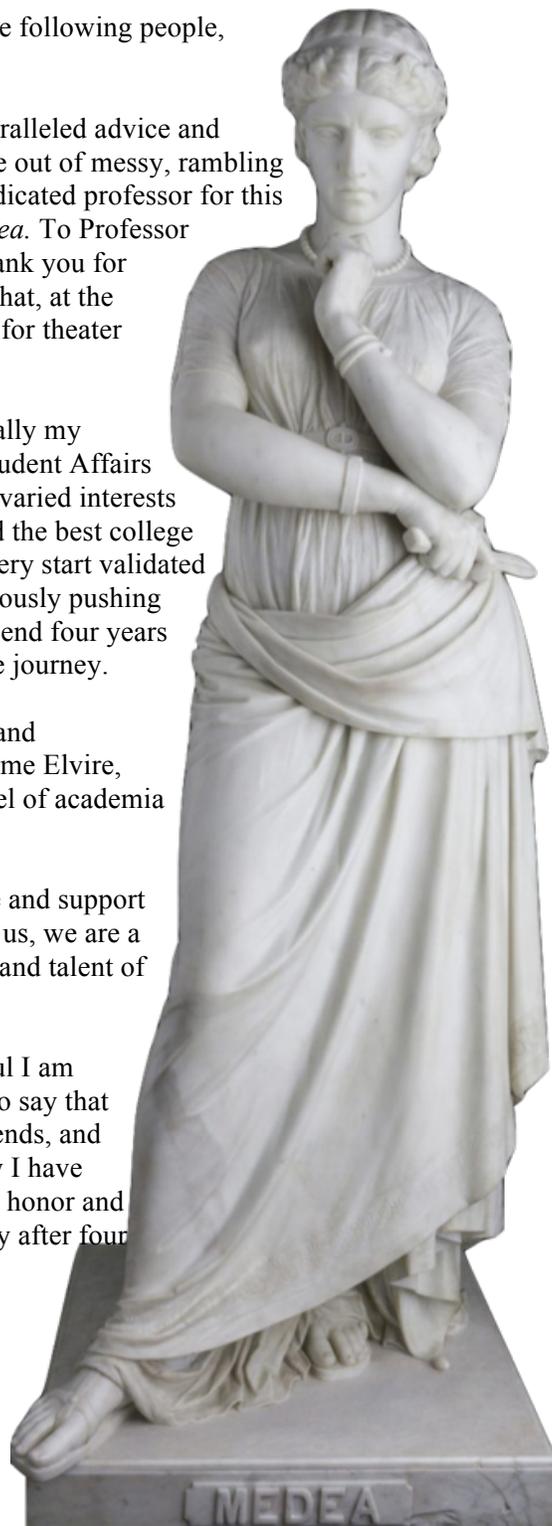
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Story, Wetmore William. Medea. 1865-8. Marble.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Preface

The Medea Question

“She is a fierce spirit:
 A dangerous woman,
 and anyone who crosses her
 will not easily sing a song of triumph.
 But here come the boys after their run,
 suspecting nothing of their mother’s tragedy.
She frightens me.”
 - Euripides¹

Theater is an ancient and powerful art form, one that strikes at the very heart of what it is to be human. The codified formula of the stage-set-audience performances that we know today have their roots in ancient cultures, the intricacies of which are now obscured by the veil of history. It is impossible to pinpoint exactly when or where “theater” as such first emerged. Was it religious sacrifices in pre-Hellenistic Greece that gave rise to the ceremonial, ritualized theater of Euripides and Sophocles? Was it a natural evolution of the oral histories and complex ancestral tales told around nomadic campfires? The debates are fierce, but the actual origin of theater remains hazy. What is clear, though, is that there is no other form of art that so completely encapsulates the human experience, with all its messy and complicated truths. And theater has the power to question these truths, to rework and rewrite them, to shine a light on harsh realities that forces spectators to challenge their own worldviews.

Another ancient, long-codified tenant of the human experience is motherhood. Many arguments can - and have - been made regarding the obligation of motherhood imposed on women, especially common in patriarchal structures. The inexorable entanglement of maternal obligations, gender dynamics, reproductive rights, and simply *personhood* is not a novel concept,

¹ from *Medea*, trans. Paul Roche, lines 50 - 56. Emphasis mine.

nor is the abuse faced by women who cannot or do not become mothers. From the demon Lilith, villainized as a child-killing demon upon her refusal to submit to Adam, to the horror movie trope of eerie mothers-who-aren't-mothers, there has long been a monstrous connotation attached to those women who cast off the mantle of motherhood, or "anti-mothers". The intersection of these two subjects - motherhood and theater - represents the starting point of this thesis.

Perhaps the most famous monstrous mother is that of Medea, Euripides' fearful and fascinating child-killer. *Medea* is among the most popular Greek tragedies, and it has held that title since at least the Western "re"discovery of the Greek works in the Renaissance era. The productions, adaptations, and reimaginings of Medea and her monstrous deeds easily number in their hundreds. Medea and Medea-kinds have been portrayed as demonic and irredeemable monsters, insane and irrational wives, cold and heartless sorceresses, and everything in between.² She thus clearly has a unique endurance in the dramatic sphere, and is among the most controversial figures in theater, representing an influence that expands beyond the stage. Medea is a perfect example of the power of theater to challenge societal customs through reworkings of old texts, with specific reference to motherhood and maternal obligations in patriarchal contexts.

In this thesis, I examine three different productions to answer what I have termed "the Medea question": *why*, precisely, has Medea enjoyed such continued popularity the world over, especially as a monstrous mother who is radically *not* condemned as irredeemably evil? And why do new adaptations and reimaginings continue to emerge? Cultural contexts, social critiques, and contemporary reactions are combined to explain what makes a terrible mother and a powerful woman both fascinating and horrific. I argue that the way that monstrous mothers are

² See Appendix for a visual survey of various depictions of Medeas, meant to augment the portrayals discussed herein.

portrayed and perceived is a direct result of a predominantly patriarchal societal structure that needs motherhood (and its related oppressions) to survive.

The first of three *Medea*-kinds discussed herein is the original - written by the tragedian Euripides in 431 BC, in Athens, Greece. The next production hops a continent and the intervening two millennia to 1998 Ireland, where Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* transplants *Medea* to the Irish Midlands, reimagining her as the ostracized Hester Swane. The third and final chapter focuses on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). Here, the *Medea* character is Nora Helmer, a Norwegian housewife who realizes her maternal duties have prevented her from becoming a human being in her own right. Carr's work is a direct adaptation of *Medea*, and thus needs no rationale for its connection to the original. However, such is not the case for *A Doll's House* - instead, it is more loosely inspired. I view it as a deliberately reimagined and transformed version of *Medea*; the similarities between the anti-mothers and the visceral audience reactions to *Medea*, Hester, and Nora are a clear thread that weaves the three works together. As shall be shown, the tensions that are so central to the original Greek *Medea* continue to echo through the subsequent years, and are just as relevant in 1990s Ireland and 19th century Scandinavia as they were in Ancient Athens.

Ultimately, I argue that *Medea*'s persistent presence in theatrical (re)productions is directly linked to ideas surrounding motherhood and the obligation to it; the controversy caused by these three *Medea* stagings plainly reflect the societal expectations placed on women, as well as the expressed fear of monstrous mothers. I explain the reasons behind the patriarchal dread of antimothers through the lens of *Medea*, and show how each production illuminates crucial and interlinking aspects of her character.

Today, new productions of *Medea* continue to proliferate. In the last decade alone, there have been over 20 professionally staged versions in the United States and Europe. This is a staggering amount especially for what is, theatrically speaking, a very brief time period. One of the most critically acclaimed *Medeas* is the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 2002 production. For the interests of this thesis, the most predominant feature is its *monstrosity* - the portrayal of Medea was unapologetically horrific. She emerged drenched in blood at the climactic scene, holding her dead children, and Fiona Shaw's deservedly-lauded acting left the audience reeling in open-mouthed shock, unable to turn away. The directorial choices drew parallels with the then-nascent Afghanistan war, a newly post-9/11 America, and reproductive rights debates; all issues that are equally apparent in the first *Medea*. BAM's staging perfectly encapsulates how Euripides' work still resonates today, and how productions continue to leverage the unique potential of Medea, in all her monstrous anti-motherhood, to rework contemporary social frameworks into the tragedy. The first chapter examines this production in detail in conjunction with the first *Medea*.

Chapter 1

The Early Antimother: The Monstrous Maternal in Euripides' *Medea*

“All I could hope was that my crimes were so monstrous
that the love was no bigger than a mustard seed in the shadow of them,
and I wished I'd committed even greater ones
to hide it more deeply still...”
-Philip Pullman³

Medea was first performed in Athens in 431 BC, as part of the City Dionysia festival. This festival was a grandiose affair, spanning three days and comprising various rituals before culminating in a dramatic competition on the last day. Attended by Athenians and visiting dignitaries alike, it was a celebration of the polis and all its people. Nevertheless, certain distinctions were made: most relevant, the concluding performances of the three tragic trilogies were attended only by men. The dramatic competition of 431 BC is where the character of Medea, that majestically monstrous mother, first physically manifested. When she stepped onto the Athenian stage, she stepped into the annals of history, and she still leaves her triumphantly bloody footsteps across stages the world over, two millennia later.

The Athens of Euripides' times was turbulent, characterized by both internal and external conflicts. The first performance of *Medea* occurred on the eve of the Peloponnesian War. Fractures within the Delian League – a confederation of city-states (or *polei*) informally led by Athens – had reached a breaking point as Sparta and Corinth challenged Athens' disproportionate influence. The Peloponnesian War would last for the next 27 years, and far from re-establishing Athenian power, it would be seen as a drawn-out, massively expensive catastrophe. War officially broke out a few weeks after the City Dionysia where *Medea* debuted;

³ From Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials Book III: The Amber Spyglass*. New York: Lauren-Leaf (2007).

historical sources show that at the time of the festival, the inevitable specter of war hovered over Athens, as continued aggressions from other confederation *polei* tipped closer and closer to full-out conflict. Euripides was clearly aware of this, and he used *Medea* to aggressively critique what he saw as a hubris-filled attempt to spread Athenian power, doomed to failure. He found himself in the midst of an ongoing breakdown of an “Athenian polity in immense social crisis” (Caraher 155). Tensions around foreign influences, the legitimacy of imperial war campaigns, and citizenship rights were high, and Euripides’ controversial play pushed all of these to the forefront through the lens of gender.

Euripides, more than any other of the extant Greek tragedians, addressed the destructive effects of Athenian power and imperialism, both in far-flung territories and Athens itself, using female characters to illustrate these realities. An outspoken critic of the belligerent style of warfare and colonial expansion that contributed to the Peloponnesian war, Euripides faced virulent criticism for attacking and affronting Athenian society by giving a voice to the voiceless – protagonists who were varyingly women, foreign-born, and captives. By foregrounding these women and their struggles, he forced his audience to reckon with the ugly underbelly of Athenian society – the collateral damage that was overlooked in favor of promoting Athenian glory and the falsely-idealized democratic polis.

Athens’ lauded inclusivity only extended as far as free Athenian-born men, while women, slaves, and foreigners (*metics*) were pushed to the sidelines. Women held the doubly-contradictory position of being unable to vote, hold land, or act in a civil-servant capacity, but nevertheless shouldering the responsibility of furthering the family’s – and by extension the polis’ - legacy via childbirth. This socially imposed obligation was two-fold, as it also ensured that Athens would continue producing strong (male) soldiers who would maintain its powerful

reputation. Civic and personal identity were inexorably intertwined, but while Athens' stability rested on the cooperation of all of its inhabitants, the actual right to participate in this stability was only reserved for a few.

Further complicating the paradoxical nature of Athenian society at the time of *Medea* was a citizenship law passed by Pericles in 451 BC. Previously, any (male) child born to at least one Athenian parent was granted full citizenship and the associated rights. An Athenian mother, married to a *metic*, could therefore pass citizenship onto her children; a foreign-born mother with an Athenian partner could similarly rest assured that her children would be Athenian citizens. The Citizenship Law, however, destroyed this right, denying citizenship to children of foreign parents.⁴ By the 431 BC staging of *Medea*, the first generation of children born under this law was just coming of age. In the play, Jason's abandonment of Medea and their children in order to wed a "truly Greek" princess, all to further his own legacy and lineage, is presented as despicable – it is Euripides' direct challenge to the citizenship law, a regulation that makes children lesser-than through no fault of their own.

Motherhood obviously fell to women, both through the expectation of maternity and the reinforcement of gender roles which emphasized this maternal obligation, but was ultimately seen as a vehicle to continue the *male* legacy and uphold a patriarchal power structure. Maternal obligations were further intertwined with issues of xenophobia, war, and Athenian imperialism, especially in the previously described context in which Euripides was writing. The citizenship law clearly complicated motherhood, while the looming Peloponnesian war exacerbated the arguably futile endeavor of raising a son only to send him off to battle. Euripides' *Medea* brings

⁴ Aristotle, *Athenian Politics* 26.4: "...an enactment was passed on the proposal of Pericles confining citizenship to persons of citizen birth on both sides." (tr. H. Rackham).

all of these issues together to craft a longstanding work that has endured *because* of its controversial portrayal of a sympathetic yet alien protagonist.

Thus, writing during the era when imperialist actions propelled Athens into the devastating Peloponnesian War, Euripides synthesized the incendiary political and social climate of his time to fan the flames of the issues expressed in *Medea*. In portraying a foreign born, supernatural, antimaternal woman as a complex protagonist destroyed by a typical Greek hero, Euripides challenged the idea of the hyper-civilized Athens, and the wider society that purported to be the pinnacle of inclusivity and fair treatment.

The societal context thus outlined, we now turn to the setting of Euripides' *Medea* itself. It opens on a tense-filled, chaotic moment in the palace of Corinth. Ten years have passed since Medea abandoned her homeland out of love for Jason (of the Argonauts). A princess in her original Colchis, Medea was foreign to both the Corinthians of the play and to the Athenian audience.⁵ She is the granddaughter of the sun god Helios, and her niece is the infamous Circe; these divine and supernatural relations emphasize her otherness, as she is not wholly human the way her fellow characters are. Medea murdered her brother and betrayed her father to help Jason steal the Golden Fleece; Jason brought her back to Corinth where they had two children, both boys, and have lived there ever since. The play begins directly after the revelation that Jason now plans to marry the princess of Corinth, forsaking Medea and their sons in the process. Medea is "spurned and desolate", lamenting how she destroyed all ties with her own family and home to journey for Jason, only to be so betrayed now (Euripides 337). She is facing exile from Corinth, because, being foreign, she cannot carry on Jason's legacy through their children, and so for

⁵ Corinth (Kórinthos) is located about 50 miles from Athens, on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Corinth; Colchis is located on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, in the western region of modern Georgia.

Jason to ensure that his line lives on he must marry a Greek wife. Corinth's citizens also fear her because of her Colchean roots, her reputation for witchcraft, and her "unfeminine" nature.

As the play progresses, Medea shows herself to have cunning to rival any man's, especially illustrated in her repeated ability to cut down Jason's blustering to expose his base hypocrisy. She negotiates an extra day in Corinth to put her affairs in order; in reality, she is planning the murder of Creon and his daughter (Jason's bride-to-be). At the same time, Medea is spiraling further into a revenge-fueled maelstrom: she announces her intention to kill her children, which she sees as the "supreme way to hurt [her] husband" (Euripides 336). However, she swings back and forth on her commitment to actually go through with the act until the very moment of the murder; she is clearly torn, and balks twice before finally carrying out the infanticide. She fatally poisons the princess and Creon, and kills her children – she denies Jason (and by extension, the audience) closure by refusing to release their bodies to him for burial.

Medea exits *ex machina*⁶, in an eerie flying chariot pulled by dragons, bound for the shrine of Hera to bury her children, and then onto Athens wherein she has secured protection from the king Aegeus (fig. 1). This ending is significant, because the chariot provides Medea with an escape from repercussions – furthermore, it is understood to be a chariot sent by Helios, the sun god. Euripides' choice to have Medea depart in triumph, with divine assistance, implies that her actions are not completely horrible, for if they were, then gods would surely not have supported her escape.

⁶ *Ex machina*: (n) "god from the machine"; the sudden appearance of a divine entity at the end of a play. The technical term refers to the way that the actors-as-gods were hoisted in a crane above the stage. Medea's case is both technically and figuratively *ex machina*, as Euripides blurs the lines between her mortality and divinity throughout the play culminating in her exit.



Figure 1: A terracotta vase depicting the ex machina exit of Medea (center). She flees in a chariot pulled by dragons, as Jason (bottom left) watches helplessly. The bodies of their children are draped across the altar at lower right, a slight variant to the Euripidean narrative, in which Medea escapes with the children.

Photo Information: Mixing Vessel with Medea Departing in a Chariot (detail), circa 400 B.C., attributed to the Policoro Painter. Terracotta, 19 7/8 x 19 5/8 in. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund, 1991.1.

Throughout *Medea*, opposing binaries emerge and collapse: foreign tensions, household conflicts, marriage feuds, legacy concerns, and Greek (and Athenian-led) imperialistic damage. Lines of morality are also continually transgressed. These polarities also apply to the play, both in plot and in the titular character. She is unarguably alien – but the true brilliance of Medea, the reason she still occupies stages globally, is that she can still elicit pity and – terrifyingly – recognition - from her audience. *Medea* is disturbing because the protagonist evokes sympathy and horror simultaneously. In her role as a foreigner, a sorceress, a kin-murderer, a woman, and crucially as a mother, Medea’s character embodies an inescapable *other* – especially to the male Athenian audience during (or directly preceding) wartime. Euripides saw Athens as a society that problematically glorified war and imperial extension, regardless of the fallout, and did not acknowledge women outside of their ability to carry on the all-important male bloodline. He thus wrote Medea as a tragic protagonist who, in her position *as* the main protagonist and the focal point of the plot, is “at once heroic, sympathetic, and morally repugnant” to the audience, in order to foreground his critique of Athenian social values (Mcdermott 796).

Medea is very much an alien character, and it is precisely this otherness that forced Athenians to reckon with the detrimental treatment of women in their own society. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection provides a fitting lens with which to analyze this aspect of Medea. Abjection, according to Kristeva, is what “disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (390). It has very few definable qualities – Kristeva emphasizes that its self-ness comes from what it is *not*. That is, its only definition is “that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva 391).

The abject is recognizable through its liminal otherness and "in betweenness", through the fact that something about it is inherently not the viewer. Of course, in knowing what one is

not, one therefore, in opposition, defines one's own self. Abjection forces an individual to reckon with what they "permanently thrust aside in order to live" – literally, bodily fluids, but intangible concepts as well (Kristeva 392). It is repugnant, horrific, viscous, bloody. It is a humanoid creature that is somehow undefinably *wrong*. It is the creeping sickness of unknown fluids underfoot. It is a mother that kills her children and stands, drenched in blood and unapologetic, in the aftermath. Crucially, in self-identifying through the other, in something that overturns common sense and the usual order of things, the self-identifier becomes face-to-face with it.

In essence, Medea's otherness acts as a dramatized version of the "abject, an "unnerving liminality" in her "apocalyptic transgression of the ideal vision of the social polity" (Caraher 168). For Medea, the abject is living in gray half-life as a mother in exile, with her children devoid of rights – it is all the more repugnant to her because of the reasoning behind it, the utter betrayal after all she's done for and because of Jason. It is in every possible way *not* what or who she is. For the audience, the abject is Medea's infanticide, exacerbated by her additional alien qualities. Medea's abjection manifests in the complete and violent refusal of motherhood through the horrific killing of her children.

The idea of abjection and transgressive plotlines extends to the rest of *Medea*: as mentioned, the binaries of civil, social, and marital life are constantly problematized by Euripides. In showing a woman so far removed from the Athenian male experience, the play reflected said identities back at the audience: "the abject is opposed to I" (Kristeva 391). The audience knew Medea, in all her glorious horror, was as different from them as possible – and they recognized themselves in opposition, while being forced to confront the horror on stage. Medea was thus immediately characterized upon her debut in 431 BC as a monstrous mother,

emblematic of all the things that Athens and its women were not. The otherness and its associated categories - Medea's foreignness, supernaturalism, masculine attributes – all culminate in antimotherhood, the most extreme iteration of an alienness that frightfully and drastically threatened Athens' established social order; the complete antithesis of the patriarchal ideas of Athenian women.

Medea's sufferings, her violent revenge, and the ambiguous ending (Euripides did not condemn her, even after the infanticide) pushed the audience to face the polarizing social issues that were catching flame under the spark of war and the cracks in the façade of an apparently hyper-civilized society. Medea critiques both gender dynamics and the Athenian-supported technique of colonization and aggressive war. Euripides' writing of maternal infanticide shows Medea not as a monstrous, spite-filled hag, but as a victorious survivor who refuses to bend to the patriarchal oppression that regards her as hardly a human at all. In this audacious portrayal of a mother betrayed through no actions of her own, pushed to desperate and depraved ends, *Medea* is a clear critique of a society that subjugates and ignores women. The audience would have faced these actions and experienced the strange abjection and recognition in the character of Medea on stage. However, this does not mean they accepted what was being implied (that women are constantly, brutally oppressed socially and emotionally, and could and would be driven to such horrific actions if it continues). The reactions of the audience reflect the views of motherhood and the women who violently reject it.

The Athenian audience had a solid grasp of the mythological canon – an inescapable byproduct of existing in a society that inexorably intertwined religious education with civic and social life. As such, they would have been familiar with the underlying myth which comprises the source material for *Medea*: the journey of the Argonauts. Jason and the Argonauts were

famed for their legendary journey around the Black Sea and their quest for the Golden Fleece. Jason was a hero, one to be emulated as a paragon of Greek adventurism and strength. The story of Medea herself, prior to Euripides' version, was generally one of a barbarian sorceress who both fascinated and repulsed, in the manner of typical horror stories. The festival attendees who witnessed the first performance of *Medea* were not expecting to be introduced to a novel story – they already knew that Jason and Medea were lovers, and that Medea killed her children. They were instead eager to know how Euripides, that infamously controversial playwright, reworked this mythological tale and portrayed Medea and Jason.

“If the audience entered the theatre expecting to see Medea the exotic criminal, they received essentially (though not entirely) the opposite impression” (Lawrence 49). From the opening scene, the view of Jason as a famed heroic figure is overturned. The first lines tell of Jason's betrayal even as Medea has been his “perfect foil... a woman who does not go against her man” (Euripides 337). Euripides unequivocally establishes Jason as a betrayer and a flawed, selfish figure. Jason claims that he is Medea's savior, and in bringing her to the civilized Corinth from her wild homeland he has gifted her with countless advantages:

“In the first place, you have a home in Hellas instead of some barbarian land [...] you have had your talents recognized all over Greece and won renown. For were you living at the world's ends your name would not be known” (Euripides 356).

Jason argues that in bringing Medea to Greece, he made her widespread fame possible, ignoring the fact that her reputation as a witch and a foreigner is exactly why she's being exiled now. She cannot legitimately act as a “worthy” wife for Jason because, as mentioned, being foreign-born means that their children are illegitimate. This is, of course, a direct critique on Euripides' part of the aforementioned Citizenship Law that denied citizenship to children of

foreign mothers. Her supernatural powers that further cause Corinth to view her with suspicion further augment the need for Jason (and Creon) to send her away lest she sabotage their plans.

The constant manipulation of women by men who use them to their own ends is reflected in Jason's half-truths, and Medea makes this impossible to ignore through her words and actions. Jason attempts to frame his betrayal and perfidy as a way to help Medea and their sons: "it was an act of common sense, secondly, unselfish, and finally a mark of my devotion, to you and all the family" (Euripides 358).

Medea's response fiercely cuts down Jason's cherry-picked arguments, calling him explicitly a "glib hypocrite" and exposing his rationale as a selfish and misogynistic act driven by lust for a "fresh young virgin" and the fear that his "glory is tarnished by an aging wife" (Euripides 358). The final (emasculating) blow to Jason is Medea's denial of his offered help, conditional upon her quiet and submissive banishment into exile. "Forget your feelings of resentment, let yourself be helped", Jason says condescendingly, to be met with Medea's vicious "I would not touch anything of yours – how dare you offer it!" (Euripides 359).

Medea adamantly refuses to subject her sons to a life on the edges, outcast from Corinth in a sort of half-life, and tells Jason as much. Euripides forces the audience to view Jason as a man who unfairly has ruined the life of a woman who has helped him greatly, been wholly loyal to him for a decade, and diligently raised their sons. Of course, the very fact that they *are* sons further adds to the despicable betrayal, as it is an emphatic fulfillment of her maternal obligation to bear Jason not only children but *male* children. In short, Medea has been everything an "ideal" Greek mother is meant to be, up to the point that the play opens.

In showing her rebuttal to Jason, clear and concise in the face of his blustering, Euripides flips the gender dynamic as Medea embodies a typically masculine approach to corroborate her

arguments that she is responsible for Jason's heroic deeds. Through logical and rational responses, her argument leaves no room for doubt that Jason has committed a pathetic and unjustifiable treachery in discarding her so basely. In doing so, "Medea claims the kind of agency associated in Greek society not with women, but with men such as Ajax, Achilles, and—before Euripides—with Jason himself" (Macmaster 149).

Rather than an overly emotional, irrational woman, Medea time and again proves that she is cunning and capable of complex manipulation, a clever and talented rhetorician who perfectly embodies the Greek values of reason, honor, and well-formed debate, even as she simultaneously is a foreign child-killer. The culminating scene – Medea killing her children, offstage but told through the chorus' lines and Medea reemerging bloodied and horrific – comes at the end of a play which has thus far torn down the ideal image of the cultural hero (Jason) at every turn. The audience, however little they may have wanted to, would have felt some degree of sympathy towards Medea, and in that sympathy, they reach their own depths of horror. They are sympathizing with a child-killer, a mother who killed her own children and who escapes unscathed. The blame is placed equally on Jason and the societal pressures that led Medea to commit the horrific act. In Athenian society, where women were viewed as crucial only insofar as their ability to bear children extended, this voluntary and violent rejection of motherhood encompasses all the previous *othering* of Medea and caused a visceral backlash among Euripides' contemporaries.

Foremost among the virulent critics of Euripides was Aristotle; his critique has also been best preserved over the intervening millennia, and will be used as the archetypal response to *Medea* in Athenian philosophical discussion. Commenting both on the tragic structure of Euripides' play as well as the "proper" place of women, Aristotle took offense to nearly every

aspect of *Medea*. While technically fulfilling Aristotle's definition of the ideal tragic hero, the philosopher does not attribute such a complimentary position on Medea, because his patriarchal suppositions override Medea's actual character. In doing so, Aristotle is a perfect example of how contemporary criticism of Euripides' *Medea* reflected societal views of gender dynamics and motherhood.

In his *Poetics*, widely considered the earliest work of dramatic theory, Aristotle describes the components of an ideal tragic play, and what entails the epitome of a tragic hero, with specific references to the performances (roughly) of his time. Dominant among his criteria is the fact that the hero must be able to invoke pity and fear in the audience. The pity comes through the "goodness" of the hero, and it is here Aristotle first mentions Medea. Regardless of intention, a maternal killer cannot be defined as *good* – however, Aristotle emphasizes that it is enough to not be an "utter villain" (Aristotle 13.2). More importantly for Aristotle, though, is that she clearly has a personal code she strictly follows: Medea fears humiliation, embodied in her utter refusal and horror at the idea of living a life in exile. This is a theme repeated throughout stories of typical male Greek heroes, the idea of reputation and legacy being held as the utmost sign of success, as well as a sense of "heroic resolve" – the commitment to see things through, no matter how frightening. In her resolve to avoid dishonor at any cost Medea parallels the male heroic code as expressed by Aristotle. Thus her "goodness" does not stem from her actions, but from the fact that she upholds an idea of honor, despite the horrific way in which she carries it out. Aristotle's criteria for a tragic hero is therefore embodied in Medea.

Medea, however, is still the subject of aggressive criticism by Aristotle, despite her actual actions and words aligning with his described qualifications for an exemplary tragic hero. Aristotle's issues lie with her gender, and her transgression of the typically defined roles

imposed upon Greek women. Aristotle explicitly saw women as lesser than, fit only to fulfill the wishes and purposes of their male superiors.⁷ As seen previously, Medea clearly and completely is *not* portrayed as submissive or lesser than; in contrast, the inferior character is Jason, which completely overturns the expected dynamic between wife and husband, father and mother, man and woman. It stands to reason, then, that Aristotle's negative critique of *Medea* – which he refers to as “faulty in the general management of its subject” – despite Medea herself fulfilling the philosopher's standards for a perfect tragic hero, is a response based in misogyny and the patriarchal ideals of women in classical Athens (Aristotle 21). Aristotle, entrenched in a social context that gave women essentially no independence, thus saw Medea as a monstrous mother. To him, she was a woman outside of boundaries who committed a horrific act and utilized masculine techniques to carry out her nefarious plans. Euripides' ending augmented Aristotle's aversion for the play, as it did not punish Medea for her transgressions.

Euripides' use of a figure typically not given a voice or agency, much less sympathy, created a complex and multilayered protagonist in Medea. In a time of social crisis and impending war, the play uses themes of international relations, marital tension, and gender dynamics to critique the society it was performed in, exploding the typical binaries and assumed gender roles. Medea's alienation, especially when compared to the male Athenian audience, allowed her to embody this critical function, significantly through the lens of motherhood. Euripides portrays her not as an irredeemable monster, but rather as a victor who emerges successfully from patriarchal subjugation and injustice. In doing so, the play prompted an outpouring of reactions that condemned it on several levels: the ambiguous (i.e. not immediately punished) portrayal of

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*: “The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled” (1254b, 13–14).

the maternal infanticide, the female protagonist who tears down an idolized mythological hero, and the thinly veiled criticism of Athenian imperial expansion and society.

Euripides' *Medea*, in all her complex sympathy and horror, has fascinated and repulsed audiences in numerous reproductions since she first bloodied the stage. It's important to distinguish between reproductions and adaptations: reproductions stay largely true to the original text, but vary in setting, keeping the initial style of speech and generally the names of the characters. Adaptations in contrast are *based* on the source material, but change to varying extents names, places, settings, and plot; mostly adhering to the same narrative flow, but transforming the original words completely. Adaptations will be analyzed in later chapters; the concluding section here will be a brief example of a reproduction of *Medea* that plays upon the same themes that the original did, thus showing the continued relevance of these issues.

In late 2002, The Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City staged *Medea*, starring Fiona Shaw and directed by Deborah Warner. A transplant from the United Kingdom, the production was met with reviews which emphasized the unhinged desperation of Shaw's *Medea*, driven to her horrific act by the impositions forced upon her and the grievances suffered under the heavy hand of a male-privileging society. Contextually, in the United States, this was almost exactly a year after the start of the war in Afghanistan, and mere months before the start of official conflict in Iraq; the parallels with pre-Peloponnesian War Athens are clear. It was a time of social unrest and the fracturing and reforming of social divides – as director Deborah Warner stated, it was a time of “living in a very wobbly democracy” (Fricker).

At the most basic, the main difference in how Fiona Shaw played *Medea* as opposed to Euripides' version (such as we can assume) is the detached bewilderedness she shows through much of the play. She is clearly confused at how fast her fortunes have fallen, a rapid descent

into betrayal that makes even less sense given her loyalty and support of Jason. This underlines how living a world that is so oppressive and limiting to women, especially as a foreign mother, has ruined this once majestic queen through no fault of her own. Nevertheless, the cunningness that makes her so frighteningly wonderful to watch is not completely gone – it appears in flashes, as she swings violently between an almost childlike confused grief and vicious, revengeful planning. It is this blurriness that makes her “so vivid, so haunting, and so damningly easy to identify with” (Brantley). The point was to emphasize how deeply Jason has affected Medea, further illustrated through Medea’s internal conflict regarding the infanticide. She is pushed to the utmost depths of horror by overwhelming forces, and her actions reflect a situation that is “very complicated and very, very terrible”; the true tragedy is how Medea is shoved to “the place where she has no choice” (Fricker).

This production also foregrounds the “otherness” of Medea in relation to Jason, Creon, and the city of Corinth as a whole. Crucial to the understanding of Warner’s production and Shaw’s portrayal is Medea’s isolation, her opposition to Corinth and its people: this is reflected on stage through nationality and the level of fame that Medea and Jason have. The Irish-born Fiona Shaw’s distinct voice stands in opposition to the chorus (mainly American-accented), and Medea’s reputation further pushes her to the outskirts. Everyone in Corinth knows that she is foreign, she is a sorceress, and she is married to the idolized hero Jason – a celebrity coupledom. The BAM production ratcheted this up to an intense level, invoking parallels with today’s celebrity culture that relishes in the downfall of women and the voyeur-like fascination with scorned wives.

Medea’s otherness reaches an extreme in the climactic killing scene, at which point it tips over into abjection as described by Kristeva. Throughout the play, her spiraling mental state has

been kicking up into increasingly high registers- “insult, hate, fury”- until she reaches a point where she is “genuinely scary” rather than just sympathy-evoking (Lahr). Her reappearance onstage after the killing of her children is abject in a very tangible way (fig. 2). She is utterly, completely, and entirely drenched head to toe in blood. Her children hang over her chest and her arms, clutched to her heart. The physical appearance – and not just appearance, but the absolute excessive abundance – of blood enacts revulsion and horror, embodying the concept of abjection in full swing.

In this image, the physical example of the abjection discussed above, Medea’s *otherness* culminates. The audience reacts with horror, disgust, and a morbid fascination. The bodies of Medea’s children are draped over her arms, and her stunned yet piercing gaze seems to simultaneously accuse and implore the audience: *You are watching me, in my deepest and darkest depth of shame, and you cannot look away. You do not want to look away.*

Warner’s reproduction thus plays on many of the same themes as Euripides’, and due to its more recent provenance, images further emphasize these motifs, as the one above clearly exemplifies. As has been shown in both original and recent productions, Euripides’ *Medea* has inspired fierce critiques of the transgressive titular character. The portrayal of a terrible anti-mother who is not ultimately condemned and the ensuing reactions represent the social context regarding motherhood specifically and women more generally. Medea’s infanticide is not blamed solely on her, and thus the awful deed shifts reflect on the society that caused it. The true horror lies in the undeniable idea that, if a clever, intelligent queen like Medea can be pushed to such lengths by the men around her, what is to stop it from happening to others – including the women closest to those in the audience?



Figure 2:: The bloody re-emergence after the infanticide. Medea stands drenched in blood, the stained bodies of her children draped across her chest.

Photo Information: Fiona Shaw as Medea in Euripides' *Medea*, translated and adapted by Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael. Directed by Deborah Warner, October 1 - 8, 2002, at Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York. Photo by Richard Avedon for *The New Yorker*.

Deborah Warner, asked if she was drawn to direct the play in a modern setting because she sees herself in Medea, responded in a way that perfectly encapsulates the arguments made thus far:

“I am no more like Medea than any member of the audience, but I am no less like Medea either. History shows us that people are capable of a spectrum of activity that is mindboggling. There is no point in living with open-jawed shock about it- *one has to look at it, and in the looking become braver*” (Fricker, 2002).⁸

This was true in classical Athens in 431 BC, when Euripides audaciously staged a character so unlike anything seen before on the dramatic stage, and it was equally true in this 2002 production. As we shall see in additional settings, Medea’s unique ability to evoke both fear and pity, to force social issues to the forefront at every turn through the lens of motherhood, and to radically *not* be condemned for her bloody murdering, has ensured that her presence continues to resonate on stages around the globe.

⁸ Emphasis mine.

Chapter 2

The Adapted Antimother: Reclaiming Maternal Agency in *By the Bog of Cats*

“The rage in women is terrifying. The rage doesn’t come out of nowhere.
If society is always saying no to you, that rejection has to go somewhere.
It turns dark, and it erupts.”
-Marina Carr⁹

The monstrous mother represented in *Medea* struck at the heart of the dark realities that plagued the precarious imbalance of patriarchal society. Euripides’ portrayal of a woman pushed to the utmost depths of horror forced the audience to confront the harsh truths --and destructive consequences -- of their treatment of women. Medea’s unique characteristics allowed her to maintain an extraordinarily strong presence on the stages of the world, evidenced in the numerous reproductions and adaptations that persist even today. This enduring cultural relevance allows for continued insights into societal views of motherhood and the women who reject it.

Euripides’ *Medea* was so impactful because it aggressively confronted the dominant issues of 5th century Athens – but it remains so prominent on the global stage because these issues are not confined to a single setting. The tensions emulated in the world of Jason and Medea’s Corinth play out constantly and frequently, the intervening two millennia notwithstanding. Irish playwright Marina Carr was poignantly aware of this. In an interview about her 1998 *Medea* adaptation *By the Bog of Cats*, she reflects on the unwavering appeal of anti-maternal Medea-kinds: “I think there is a hunger for that out there” (Maleny 2015). Carr is referring to the need to see complex and imperfect women portrayed in ways that encompass the “huge emotions” that define “what it is to be alive, what is it to be human”; in short, Euripides

⁹ “Marina Carr: ‘How Wonderful to Burn Down the Whole World’”. Maleny, Ian. For Irish Times, Aug 22 2015.

“asked the big questions, 2,500 years ago, and we haven’t really progressed that much”
 (Maleney 2015).

Produced in 1998 at the Abbey Theater in Dublin, Ireland, *By the Bog of Cats* is a loose adaptation rather than a revival- it transplants Medea, Jason, and their bloody tale to the Irish Midlands in an unspecified, but clearly modern time period. The play capitalized on a very specific moment in Irish drama: roughly a decade, between 1989-2000, wherein a proliferation of new Medeas were popping up on stages all around the country. From the Abbey Theater’s adaptation starring Fiona Shaw, to Brenden Kennelly’s fiercely anti-England production, to Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*, the abundance of *Medea* on the Irish stage sparked the not-entirely-jocular saying that Medea herself is essentially an Irish citizen, “given the number of pointed adaptations of the play that Irish writers have produced”(Sutcliffe 5). This extraordinary popularity and continued ability to adapt Medea in new ways speaks to the particular capacity of *Medea*: to be reworked into contemporary settings, over and over again, and manipulated to address specific social realities, while simultaneously maintaining its foundational structure. *By the Bog of Cats* is one such *Medea* that was adapted for 1990s Ireland. From the setting to the distinct Irish Midland accents of the actors’ speech, included in the written script, Carr explicitly places the Medea myth in an undeniably Irish context. While the names of the characters are modified, and there are several differences in the staging, the plot line and narrative remain structured along Euripidean lines.

The Medea character, here, is Hester Swane, a tinker (interchangeably called a “traveler”) who lives by the Bog of Cats. Jason is now Carthage Kilbride, and while they have been together for over a decade, they have never married officially, just like their Greek counterparts. Instead of two nameless and unseen sons, the child in *By The Bog...* is 7 year old Josie Swane, named

after Hester's own mother. This multigenerational connection between mother and daughter is a persistent motif throughout the play. "Big Josie", as the older is called, abandoned Hester at age seven, who "watched her walk away across the Bog of Cats" (Carr 29). Hester has stayed on the bog for the past thirty-three years, clinging to the hope that her mother will return to her. In the face of the constant demands to leave the Bog, she confidently declares "I can't lave – Ya see me mother said she'd come back here" (Carr 42). Hester's convoluted relationship with Big Josie, and the harm originating with this unmotherly mother, drives much of the action in *By The Bog Of Cats*. Motherhood and its complexity, even more so than in Euripides' work, is pushed unavoidably to the forefront as it plays out both backwards and forwards over time.

Despite multiple characters repeating the impossibility of Big Josie returning, and remembering her as an absent, neglectful, and occasionally full-on abusive mother, Hester recalls her as the thing she loved "more than anythin' in this cold white world" (Carr 29). She refuses to believe anything less of Big Josie, and clings to her image of a mother who loved her until the last possible moment. Hester's own daughter, Josie, experiences a similar situation. We see Hester constantly leaving her to wander the bog, but Josie nevertheless clearly prefers her mother over Carthage. Of course, as shall be shown, the explosive ending scene undoubtedly cements Hester's love for Josie, and the mother-daughter bond parallels Hester and Big Josie's, regardless of its potential toxicity. Carr portrays motherly love in a way that challenges and reimagines the obligations placed on Irish women by a male-privileging society through these complicated mother-daughter relationships.

Hester's connection with her mother, in addition to being a main factor in her characterization, is also threatening to the manipulative men in the play. Carthage is viscerally against Hester's refusal to leave the Bog because he is marrying Caroline Cassidy, the daughter

of a well-off farmer. Paralleling the original *Medea*, Josie and Hester are being discarded for their otherness and their illegitimacy, which culminate in their inability to carry on the Kilbride legacy. Carthage has turned to a well-established, truly Irish family to ensure his line lives on. He is obsessed with his reputation, with fame, and with wealth; even though Hester was intrinsic in his meteoric rise, and they have a daughter together, he has no qualms in leaving her. However, the deep attachment that binds Hester to her mother and the Bog prevents him from easily severing all ties with her, thus complicating his scheme. Similarly, (and this shall be elaborated upon later), Big Josie has a reputation as a sorceress, and it is implied that she passed the so-called dark arts onto her daughter; several characters cite this witchcraft as reasoning for forcing Hester out of their community. They feel threatened and challenged by Hester and her mother's reputation, thus further emphasizing how the mother-daughter relationship is embedded in the injustices Hester faces.

While Euripides, in typical Greek tragedian style, only gave significant speaking lines to minimal characters - Medea, Jason, and Creon – Carr expands the plot to include several more. Firstly, Carthage's mother, Ms. Kilbride, is vocally disdainful of Hester (and Josie) because they are "tinkers": travelers, not fully part of the town, but not complete foreigners either. They occupy a liminal space. Her outspoken prejudices towards whom she perceives as "other" add to the larger themes of the play. Caroline Cassidy, Carthage's bride-to-be, is afforded much more presence than in the original. Her child-like greed and hatred of Hester swiftly turns to disgust for Carthage as his true character is revealed, further emphasizing Carthage's selfishness in his discarding of women as soon as they cease their usefulness. Xavier Cassidy, Caroline's father (and the closest thing to Creon) is a lecherous and leering figure who attempts to assault Hester, and it is heavily implied that he will similarly harm Josie if Carthage succeeds in gaining

custody. Finally, Catwoman is Carr's iteration of the dragon-chariot and sorcery elements in Euripides; half-woman, half-cat, the Catwoman irreverently crashes religious events, laps milk from a saucer, and warns Hester of what the future holds, blurring lines between religion and superstition, present and future, and woman and animal. While the women alternate between cruelly hateful, sympathetic, and (supernaturally) helpful, the men in *By the Bog of Cats* are manipulative and violent. Carr's inclusion of these characters adds new angles to the well-known Medea story, emphasizing how treating women so horribly has fateful and irreconcilable consequences that reverberate through entire communities

The play opens on a bleak and blank winter dawn, a snow-covered ground blending into an equally pale sky. Enter Hester, trudging slowly across this unmarked space, dragging a dark shadow behind her through the snowy bog: it is the corpse of a black swan she is taking to be buried (fig. 3). She first meets the "Ghost Fancier", a reaper-like figure come to take Hester to some unspecified afterlife – only to find that he's mistaken dawn for dusk, and so will return when the sun sets on the Bog. What happens in the intervening day forms the rest of the play, and builds upon the themes foreshadowed here. Immediately, the audience and Hester herself know that her death is imminent, and that this is not a place where rationality reigns:

supernatural aspects, like the Ghost Fancier (and later Catwoman and the ghost of Hester's brother Joseph Swane), complicate the boundaries between life, death, magic, and reality.

There are veiled references throughout the first half of the play to some dark secret in Hester's past, a horrible crime that she is haunted by. Carthage attempts to place the blame solely on her, but she bites back with vicious confirmation of his equal guilt. It is eventually revealed that the two stabbed Joseph, Hester's brother, to death with a fishing knife in order to take his share of inheritance from Hester's absent father. It is this money that enabled Carthage



Figure 3: The opening scene of By the Bog of Cats, with the blind Catwoman seer (left) and Hester Swane, reacting to the prophecy that she will die by the end of the day.

Photo Information: Olwen Fouere as Hester and Joan O'Hara as Catwoman in Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats*, directed by Patrick Mason. Performed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Ireland, October 1998.

to gain a foothold in the type of high(er) society he is now marrying into, and without Hester, he would not be in his current position.

The perfidious wedding occurs at the start of Act 2, and is attended by Catwoman, Father Willow, Josie Swane, Mrs. Kilbride, and Xavier Cassidy. The tension is palpable from the start – “You’re still very tangled up with Hester, aren’t ya? I wonder have we done the wrong thing”, says Caroline to Carthage (Carr 33). Unlike in Euripides, the bride Caroline survives the rage of the Medea figure. Her directly stated misgivings represent the realization that Carthage is not a heroic and praise-worthy victim of Hester’s apparent manipulations, but rather a self-centered and power-hungry hypocrite. There is a clear absence of the happy, healthy relationship Carthage tries to portray. This conflict, while foregrounded in the dialogue, doesn’t entirely explode until Hester herself crashes the wedding. She arrives in “her wedding dress, veil, shoes, the works,” which she had bought years ago for her own wedding to Carthage, which never actually occurred and “somehow got put away” (Carr 39). This confrontation is the first in the play where all of the characters are together. Carthage’s hypocrisy and selfishness are exposed, as is his twisting of the truth. Enraged, Carthage gives Hester until the end of the day to vacate the Bog and the house, and declares his intention to keep Josie with him until she’s done so. Hester’s response swings from viciously angry to plaintive – the stage direction reads “close to tears” – as she tries to explain “I can’t lave till me mother comes... Don’t make me lave this place or something terrible will happen. You’re lavin’ me no choice but a vicious war against ya” (Carr 43). Here, when the tensions expressed so far have finally boiled over, the relationships between mother and daughter are unavoidable. They are clear in both the threats against Josie, meant to force Hester into leaving, and Hester’s reasoning behind needing to stay on the Bog. Carthage’s

actions serve to accentuate the way that an oppressive, patriarchal power structure manipulates motherhood to its own ends, regardless of the effects on mothers and their children.

The third and final act of *By the Bog of Cats* opens with Hester, her wedding dress now dirtied with mud and ash, standing in front of Carthage's burning house and barn. She has set them alight, and is ablaze herself with anger and betrayal- she'd "burn down the world if [she'd] enough diesel" (Carr 45). The ghost of her brother, Joseph, appears from the flames; the ensuing conversation reveals Hester's motivation behind murdering him. It was not only for money, as Carthage earlier implied, but as a form of revenge against those who have discarded Hester, namely her mother. This is the first time that Hester actually appears to acknowledge that her mother was flawed, exclaiming "the lyin' tongue of her!" (Carr 47).

The light is now shading towards dusk and in the ominous near-dark, Josie runs into view. She tells Hester that Carthage is taking her on the honeymoon trip, with the blindly innocent excitement of childhood. Hester implores Josie not to go, articulating her deep-seated abandonment issues: "you'll walk from me too. All me life people have walked away without a word of explanation. Josie, if you lave me ya'll die. So ya have to stay with me, d'ya see" (Carr 51). With this line, Carr emphasizes how badly Hester has been treated throughout her life, abandoned by her father, her mother, Carthage and now Josie, through no specific fault of her own. Her actions, horrible though they may be, have a clear motivation behind them, and it is impossible to watch Hester's descent into apparent monstrosity in these last few pages without acknowledging the societal forces that have pushed her to such ends. And what ends they are! Beginning with the ghostly interaction and moving through the conversation with Josie, the last act steadily increases in tension as a sense of foreboding and Hester's inevitable death - foretold at the start of the play - looms closer and closer.

A frantic Carthage tears onto the scene and demands to know why Hester set the house, the barn, and his livestock ablaze, effectively destroying everything he owns. Hester places the blame on his actions, for driving her to commit the arson, and the conversation escalates into an aggressive rehashing of their relationship's history and its implosion. Hester accuses Carthage of taking everything from her; and he may as well take Josie too, as she laments her own foolishness in thinking that he may have let her at least have her child, quite literally the only thing she has in the world. The hope that Hester has carried with her this far is now irrevocably destroyed. She has clung to the idea that Josie will be with her and *hers* regardless, by rights, and has not truly believed that Carthage can or will take her daughter from her. With Hester's scalding encouragement to "take her then, take her, ya've taken everythin' else", she relinquishes the notion that they can be together (Carr 58). Within the patriarchal landscape of the play - and the broader social context it was presented in - Josie and Hester can have no happy ending.

Now we have last come to the end, to the culminating scene of infanticide that is so central to the Medea myth. Hester, aware that her actions have rendered Josie being with her an impossibility, and facing the reality of a life in exile from her beloved bog and daughter, resigns herself to suicide. Running the very same fishing knife used to kill her brother across her breast, she is interrupted by Josie at the pivotal moment. Hester tells her daughter that she has to leave, and that Josie cannot come with her – clearly paralleling Big Josie's last interaction with Hester. Realizing that Josie will be consigned to a life of waiting for her mother to return, just like Hester herself has been, Hester wraps her arms around her daughter and rocks her gently, imploring her to close her eyes. "Are they closed tight?" she asks, and then, lightning quick, cuts Josie's throat.

The eldritch Catwoman is the first to discover what Hester has done, and immediately breaks the cryptic detachment she has carried through the play so far, screaming to “Help, somewan, help! Hester Swane’s after butchering the child!” (Carr 60). The assorted characters come on stage, drawn by her caterwauling, and soon the entire cast is gathered around the bloodied mother and daughter. The Ghost Fancier returns, visible only to Hester, and she plunges the knife into her chest. She falls to the ground, her last words a haunting “Mam.... mam...” (Carr 61). The final image is one that leaves no doubt about the unsustainability of a society that is based precariously on such drastic gender and power imbalances. Hester lies on the ground, her daughter on top of her, both tragic and unavoidable testaments to the utter destruction that stems from living in a patriarchal society that pushes women not only to be mothers but to be a certain *type* of ideal mother.

Unlike in the source material, the child in *By the Bog*, Josie, is often on stage throughout the plot, interacting directly with nearly every character. Her physical presence, her youthful exuberance, and her general *aliveness* make the bloody ending all the more jarring. Audiences have seen Josie alive and playful, so to see her so quickly and savagely killed resonates in a horrible way. The manner in which she is killed, as well, and the clear love behind it, adds to the sense of wrongness. Carr thus aggressively rewrites the typical maternal narrative that prevailed in Irish society. In having Hester kill Josie with the explicit motivation to protect her from the repression she herself has suffered, Carr affords Hester agency as a mother and allows her to reclaim her child, simultaneously subverting the common idea of maternal love. Throughout the play, Carthage constantly attempts to force Hester into leaving by threatening her with taking Josie away from her; with this infanticide, Hester declares Josie as her own, albeit in an extraordinarily violent way. It is a monstrous act, but it is not an act *of* an irredeemable monster.

Rather, it is one of a mother who purely loves her daughter, an expression of a deep and protective love. The obligation imposed on women to be mothers extends to the obligation to be *dutiful* mothers, and that typically entails putting children above all else. Carr turns this expectation on its head: killing Josie *is* an act of maternal love and of protection, but by placing it against the narrative background of male manipulation and abuse, she directly critiques a society that places all of these expectations on women yet still affords mothers very little rights in relation to their children. Motherhood on the woman's terms, and successful acts similar to Hester's (in motivation, not in actual action) to reclaim their children, were essentially nonexistent.

In 1998 Ireland – a time of abundant Irish adaptations of classical plays, including *Medea – By the Bog of Cats* was deeply immersed in several pertinent cultural developments. Divorce had been legalized only a year before, with the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act. Fierce debates had raged along religious and secular lines before the eventual passing of the amendment. The opposing side argued for retaining the sanctity of marriage at any cost, against activists who saw divorce as an opportunity for subjugated women to reclaim independence and freedom. The Act afforded women the agency to leave abusive or harmful husbands and attain financial and personal self-sufficiency through no longer being legally attached to said husband. Entwined with the Divorce Act were issues of reproductive rights, and specifically who had the right to claim children as their own. Frequently, both in courts of law and in the private sphere, custody of children and the right to make relevant decisions were awarded to fathers, even in instances wherein the more capable parent was in fact the mother. The dominant viewpoint in nearly all aspects of Irish life, in both civil and political spheres, was in support of male control

of women's wombs, and the responsibility of women to marry and become mothers as soon as possible.

Ireland has historically also been a very religious country, with a traditionally conservative mindset. The Irish Constitution of 1937 clearly articulated women's place as in the home, with a repeated and dominant emphasis on her role as a mother. In section 2, article 41, this governing structure states that mothers are not obligated to take up work outside the home, in an apparent attempt to protect the ideal family; in doing so, however, the maternal obligation forced all other identities to the side. Women were mothers, and nothing more; their value and contribution to society was inherently tied to their ability to bear and raise children in a way that upheld the cultural and patriarchal power system. Thus, as early as 1937, cultural norms were being officially codified in such a way that would set the precedent for how women were viewed and for the kind of mothers they were expected to be.

Bog of Cats, with its portrayal of a selfish and shallow man attempting to take away a mother's right to *be* a mother – Carthage's continual threats to have Josie given to his custody legally – spoke directly to these underlying issues. The implication that Hester is in fact fit to mother Josie, and that she has a wellspring of deep, deep love for her daughter, additionally acts as a critique of society's views of women. Carr seems to imply that, even though the most beneficial situation would be for Josie to live with Hester and for Carthage to start a new family with Caroline, the courts would nevertheless rule in Carthage's favor. He doesn't even *want* Josie. What he wants is a way to control Hester, a way to threaten her into submission so he can have all he wants with minimal pain: a truly Irish wife, an upstanding reputation, and an escape from Hester via the removal of any legal claim she has to their daughter.

Of course, Hester prevents Carthage from attaining any of this. She burns it all down, destroying Carthage's farm, livestock, home, reputation and child in one fell swoop. Property was (and is) directly correlated to social class in capitalist societies, both in the vaguely supernatural world of the Bog and in 1990s Ireland. Thus, Hester's arson represents the destruction of Carthage's status. As mentioned, concern over his reputation and status has been one of the motivating factors behind his discarding of Hester and Josie. In literally sending it up in flames, Hester is engaging in an act of reclamation. She has very little agency and very little property of her own, and what she does have has been used against her in attempts to make her leave the Bog and Josie. The patriarchal idea of ownership of course extends beyond the material - women are typically viewed as extensions of their male relations, whether it be husband or father. This is directly related to their ability to bear children and therefore further the status of their families through legacy concerns, as was legally the case in the original Medea's Athens, where women were listed among their husband's "property" in the official records (Lerner). This is less officially codified now, but there is still the unspoken assumption in patriarchal societies that women will marry and bear children to carry on the male bloodline. Their agency is essentially non-existent and, as is clear in *By The Bog Of Cats*, while women are seen as valuable, that importance only extends as far as their ability to be (good) mothers.

With these issues of patriarchal ownership as directly related to status and reputation, Hester directly and irreversibly attacks Carthage's power. Her acts of burning down his worldly possessions do this in a literal sense. She also destroys his figurative value, though, through her double suicide-infanticide. The arson and the killing represent vengeance as a form of freedom and reclamation that is otherwise inaccessible. Crucially, this is not a justification of infanticide. That is a monstrous and horrific act - and Carr is fully aware of it. By making this the only

choice Hester has, the only way she can claim any sense of agency and connection to her daughter, she emphasizes the societal forces that have inexorably pushed her to the darkest of places.

While Hester's suicide functions as agency-giving and reclamation of motherhood in the face of severe oppression, it also fixes her in a stationary state, a permanence that has not been present thus far. Her precarious position as a mother whose right to her daughter is threatened, and her concurrent occupancy of both the caravan, the Bog, and the house all contribute to an unsustainable instability that allows her to function as a liminal character. This liminality, in turn, leads to Hester's slippage between categories used by men to sustain a power structure that depends on women as mothers and wives.

With both the constitutional codification and the customary traditions long entrenched in Irish society, women were clearly and explicitly labeled as mothers and wives. These fixed elements contribute to the upholding of a patriarchal system that affords men power at the expense of others. Women who operated outside of these well-defined labels were typically villainized. In the case of the *Bog of Cats*, Hester troubles the strict boxes within which society attempts to situate women, giving rise to the idea of otherness. In Euripides, this took the form of the xenophobic tendencies rising concurrently with imperialistic campaigns, and Carr adapts the fear of the *other* to fittingly align with the contemporary question: What makes someone Irish, and who has the right to decide who belongs, as a woman and as a mother?

In the original *Medea*, as analyzed in the previous chapter, Medea functioned as a critique of Athenian society due to her position as other. Carr alters her in order to construct a figure who operates in a liminal space, blurring boundaries and possibilities, and in doing so challenges the customary views of motherhood and women. She is a wife, but not - she and Carthage have

never officially married. She is a daughter, but one without a mother, abandoned when she was only seven years old; and she is a mother whose identity as a mother rests on the approval of men, and is thus very precarious. In *Hester*, Marina Carr creates a woman who is never firmly in any of the paradigmatic female gender roles that society dictates.

Clearly, a dominant point of tension in the play is Hester's claim to the Bog despite the forces trying to coerce her out. She is constantly degraded for her background as a traveler (demeaningly also called a "tinker"), which does not actually tie her to a certain hometown, in opposition to the characters who are settled in the community. Demographically, she represents an outsider, but at the same time a liminal figure, since she is technically *of* the Midlands, having lived there her entire life. The cultural intermingling of foreigner-native confuses typical clear-cut delineations. Throughout the play, characters reference Hester's lack of familial and physical ties, and a fierce refusal to allow her to overcome this by staying permanently on the Bog. While Josie, by virtue of being Carthage's daughter, should be a Kilbride, not a Swane (doubly so in a patriarchal familial structure), the Swanes' status as travelers renders this impossible. "You're not a Kilbride and never will be [...] why don't ye head off in that auld caravan, back to wherever ye came from?" Mrs. Kilbride viciously snaps at Josie, emphasizing the conflicts at play in their identities (Carr 28). Hester is not seen as having a right to the Bog, despite having been raised on it her entire life, and thus the rationale behind her exile is that she, as a traveler, belongs elsewhere. Nevertheless, Hester personally sees herself as belonging to the Bog, and her refusal to leave - her refusal to concede to the forces pushing her out - allows her to transcend boundaries of Irish and not-Irish, settled and traveler, insider and outsider.

An additional factor that augments Hester's liminality is her still-strong connection to her absent mother, through the latter's association with witchcraft. Xavier expresses the need to exile

her lest she work her dark magicks on his daughter and his new son-in-law Carthage. Hester complicates the “normal” view of women in her supernatural and therefore *unnatural* capabilities. All of these aspects - Hester’s cultural foreignness, her absent mothering, and her reputation as (and of) a witch - comprise the core rationale of why she is being pushed out. By extension, Marina Carr portrays Hester as dangerously liminal and therefore threatening to the powerful men of the Bog. Hester’s nonconformance to the roles leads to her being marked as monstrous; in a patriarchal system like the one Hester (and the audience) lives in, the structure is dependent on fixing women into certain prescribed roles that uphold the power imbalance. This begs the question: *why* are they so afraid of Hester? What is it about the inherent power of mothers and marginalized women that, if allowed to reach its unfettered potential, would destroy the patriarchal power structure?

To answer this question and examine the fear of mothers who reject motherhood, we turn to the work of Gerda Lerner and Barbara Creed. The latter theorizes that the “monstrous mother” - and, by extension, the monstrous feminine - is characterized as such because of a “fear that she may castrate” (Creed 4). According to Creed, men are not afraid of monstrous women because they are castrated, as a more typical Freudian view holds, but rather because they hold the ability *to* castrate, and therefore completely destabilize male power and represent “man’s real fear of what woman might do to him” (Creed 5). Thus, if Hester is allowed to remain on the Bog and continue mothering Josie in her unique way, Carthage’s reputation and legacy will be eternally challenged. Carthage, based as he is on Jason (who, as shown in the previous chapter, embodies the Greek heroic preoccupation with fame and reputation), relies heavily on the opinion of others to maintain his own position of power. Subsequently, Hester’s refusal to leave, coupled with her liminal status and challenging of set boundaries, represents her potential to

emasculate and humiliate Carthage. Of course, she does enact this humiliation throughout the play, from exposing how intrinsic she was to his success to calling out his selfish desires to marry a younger and richer woman. Thus, the fear expressed by Carthage (and Xavier) at Hester's power and maternal connections to an equally dangerous woman can be understood through her characterization as a monstrous woman who possesses destructive ability, as outlined by Creed.

Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* further expands upon the threatening aspect of women who refuse motherhood on the terms of men. Hester clearly has a very strong maternal bond with Josie, and goes to extraordinary lengths to protect her from men who seek to use her for their own ends. While she thus embodies the apparent ideal of maternal love, it is not the "natural" way according to societal customs. She is maternal in committing the infanticide, albeit viciously so. As a monstrous mother, Hester represents a threat to the established social order, exacerbated by her unbelonging. Lerner theorizes that while men expect women to exude loving tenderness as a mother, they also "associate with women their fears of powerlessness" and, in constructing their identity in a society that benefits male power, "boys develop themselves as other-than the-mother" (Lerner 44). Hester and Big Josie represent generational iterations of an "unnatural" female presence that embody this male fear of powerlessness, as their mothering is not the kind that maintains the patriarchal structure. Hester refuses to be manipulated for the gains of men, and reclaims her motherhood and maternity in the double killing that breaks the power that Carthage holds over them. Lerner and Creed thus provide a theoretical framework that allows Hester's challenge to Carthage and the patriarchal structure to be understood; it also explains both the negative reactions to Carr's play and why Hester was viewed as such an unsustainable threat. Carr utilizes Hester's otherness and problematic mothering to emphasize

how and why maternal obligation upholds an oppressive power dynamic, and its potential to overturn it.

These tensions - identity, national belonging, stability and threats to that stability in the form of motherhood - play out in microcosm on the Bog. Although placed in a vaguely magical setting, it still strikes a chord of familiarity to Irish audiences. Carr forced them to confront these issues on the home front, and the ending was rendered all the more horrific because of how immediate and how *possible* its application was to everyday reality. Like Euripides' thinly veiled critique of his own society's failings, packaged in a way that directly tied the tragedy to the audience's daily lives, Carr leveraged major social and cultural issues to create a play that was aggressively relevant to audiences in 1998 Ireland. It was this evocative and unapologetic addressing of current issues through the lens of Hester and her sufferings that elicited strong reactions to *By The Bog of Cats*.

Carr is (in)famous for her plays that are set in a very Irish context - the midlands, with their rivers and bogs and lakes - and focus on Irish women, but unapologetically present her feminine protagonists in very un-Irish ways. As we have seen, questions of maternal obligation, reproductive rights, and "otherness" all contributed to the immediate social relevance of *By the Bog of Cats*. Hester is no exception to Carr's use of Irish familiarity to directly challenge certain societal conceptions; her liminality, nationality (and lack thereof), and familial situation creating a character who evoked condemning reactions from critics and laymen alike.

Firstly, Carr wastes no time in ensuring that *By The Bog of Cats* is not as distant from contemporary issues as the supernatural aspects may make it seem: on the very first page, under the bold heading of **TIME**, "the present" is noted in thick black print. This is purposefully ambiguous: some unspecified modern setting, malleable enough to fit a range of audience views

but clear enough to make the context aggressively relevant to all. This parallels, of course, with Euripides' blatant confrontation of his own viewers in his thinly veiled critique of extremely topical events. It is this relevancy that inspired such strong reactions, as nothing spurs virulent criticism as something that strikes at the (ugly) heart of one's own country and reality. Critics took issue with a wide range of motifs in Carr's play, from the suicide to the irreverent treatment of religion to the sweeping portrayal of an alternate and violent, yet still loving, form of motherhood.

Many critics of Carr's work, including *By the Bog of Cats*, were opposed to it as "too violent, too filled with acts of senseless cruelty" (Randolph 50). A cursory survey finds that the majority of reviews along such lines are written by men; Carr faced difficulty in getting her work initially produced, both due to these responses and because the Irish dramatic world was one exceedingly dominated by men, to the extent that it was shockingly rare for women to break into the theater scene at all. The condemnation of her tragedies as too violent and too needlessly cruel did not take into account the reality that women lived every day. Carr, like Euripides two millennia before, made her audience viscerally uncomfortable as she forced them to confront the results of the damaging and limiting chains that fettered Irish women. The fact that she does this in such a terminal and irreversible way - having Hester kill herself and her daughter - further fueled the reactions that the play received.

Vic Merriman, a theater critic writing in late 1998, did not necessarily have an explicitly negative reaction to *By the Bog of Cats*; however, his interpretation of it reflects the tensions of Irish society. His interpretation was one that identifies Hester as the antagonistic element. He saw her, and her actions, as "illustrative of aspects of Irishness which must be purged to attain a new formulation of cultural identity" (Merriman 306). Merriman interprets Hester as evil and

antagonist, something that must be definitively removed from society, despite Carr's repeated emphasis on Hester's exploitation by men that forces her to such depths of horror. His review is thus reflective of the tendency of men to ignore or disbelieve the traumatic effects a patriarchal society has on mothers and their children. It is not Hester herself who must be eradicated to ensure a stable Irish society, but rather the forces that push her to kill herself and her daughter are that which must be purged. Merriman's reaction is one that embodies the realistic situations of women in Ireland at the time, who's autonomy and claim to motherhood were constantly subject to validation by men. Of course, like the Aristotelian arguments/response analyzed in the previous chapter, this backlash further emphasizes what Carr uses Hester to underline in the play: the danger of a society that is constantly condemning women for actions that the society itself pushes them to.

Carr's portrayal of Hester directly challenges the idea of the dutiful and devoted Irish mother that was previously seen on stage and dominant in the surrounding social context of the time. In showing Hester as a woman on the edges of society, pushed to murder her daughter and herself as a last-resort attempt at escaping the injustices she faces, Marina Carr emphasizes the horrific consequences of a society that continuously relegates women to specific positions while ignoring their sufferings. Carthage must be, and is, destroyed, but what happens to the destroyers - at what cost does Hester enact her revenge? The instabilities of existing gender dynamics are thus directly called out.

Medea to an Athenian audience was complex and horrific and glorious, powerfully "unfeminine"; Hester, to her Irish spectators, is equally layered and challenging, exploding established binaries and transgressing labels at every turn. Hester is a Medea adapted to particular social issues, as is clear in the reactions to her portrayal, and a testament to the long-

lasting pertinence of the tensions first addressed in the original *Medea*. Embodied in mothers who reject maternal obligations, these Medea-types have proliferated on the world stage, including in productions that are not directly slated as Medea adaptations or revivals. The wider implications of the reception of Medea-kinds are encapsulated in the following analysis of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Chapter 3

Beyond Medea: Anti-motherhood in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

“In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal grounds of our intelligence.”

- Adrienne Rich¹⁰

Medea's bloody revenge and Hester's desperate infanticide inflamed responses that went far beyond the immediate confines of their respective stages. The reactions to these monstrous mothers exposed the instability of a patriarchal society whose survival depended on the subjugation of women and the confining obligation of motherly duty. Medea was the first woman of her kind on stage, in all her murderous glory, and Hester Swane in 1998 joined of a long line of Medeas and Medea-kinds, evidence of the lasting relevance of the issues at hand. *By The Bog of Cats* was an adaptation of Euripides' tragedy; the foundation of the original is still clearly apparent, if expanded in places, and direct parallels between all of the main Grecian characters can be found with those in Hester's world (for example, Creon and Xavier, Glauce and Caroline, Carthage and Jason, the prophet and the Catwoman). *By the Bog* squarely inhabits the label of *adaptation*, affording it significant similarities to *Medea* but distancing itself from straight revivals, such as Warner's 2001 version at Brooklyn Academy of Music.¹¹

We have thus seen varying interpretations of *Medea* through the lens of the original, of revivals, and of an adaptation. The central motif of the monstrous woman who rejects motherhood, othering herself in the process and invoking intense social reactions, reverberates beyond these to a production that is neither an adaptation or a revival. Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) has experienced the same explosive level of fame in terms of reproductions that

¹⁰ Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. WW Norton & Company, 1995. Pp. 7

¹¹ This production is discussed at the close of chapter 1; see pages 24-28.

Medea has, and the similarities between the two female leads are impossible to discount. It is *not*, however, an adaptation or revival of *Medea*. Regardless, it is chosen to conclude this analysis because of how *A Doll's House* emphasizes the ongoing relevance of the issues first brought to light in Euripides' *Medea*, and how unmotherly mothers are consistently perceived in patriarchal contexts. It is a deliberately reimagined and transformed version of *Medea*. The reactions to *A Doll's House* were extremely incendiary. The unconventional portrayal of the mother in this wildly controversial play is emblematic of Victorian society; it ultimately illustrates how mothers and women were considered the paragon of social duty, while experiencing a very different reality compared to this angelic ideal. From the central conflict to the title itself, *A Doll's House* portrayed how women are manipulated and demeaned in patriarchal society, essentially seen as nothing more than toys with a set role.

Ibsen's iconic play debuted in Copenhagen, Denmark, on the 21st of December 1879. He wrote it in roughly a year, and included his own notes with the early versions, which now provide crucial insight into both the position of women and motherhood in late 19th century Western Europe and Ibsen's own views. In one note dating to October 1878, Ibsen describes his then-unfinished play as a "modern tragedy", arguing that "a woman cannot be herself in modern society, " because it is "an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint" (Ibsen 1878). Like Euripides, Ibsen was clearly sympathetic to the plight of women, and *A Doll's House* certainly reflects this.

A Doll's House is not as literally based on *Medea* as *By The Bog of Cats*; however, as shall be shown, there are crucial themes and central motifs that easily parallel these other productions. The play centers around Nora Helmer, a Norwegian housewife, who lives an

apparently idyllic life with her husband, Torvald, and their three children. At first glance the Helmers embody the ideal domestic Elysium that Victorian society held up as the ultimate goal: a comfortable house and a man with a steady job at a bank, a beautiful and devoted stay-at-home wife, three children, and relative financial stability.¹² This is apparent from the moment the play opens: Nora arrives home with an armful of Christmas gifts, cheerfully justifying her purchases to Torvald by citing his recent promotion and their comparative wealth. Torvald gently teases her, and it is a child-like Nora who giddily rebukes his joking chastisements. Their laughter is interrupted by the arrival of Kristine, an old friend of Nora's, who has fallen on hard times and has come seeking a job. In an attempt to empathize, Nora compares Kristine's plight to her own, recounting how the family had to travel to Italy to help Torvald's health. Kristine responds that Nora "knows so little of life's burdens [herself]", gently stating "Nora, you're just a child" (Ibsen 52). The comparison of this dutiful, obedient housewife to a child is a theme that appears throughout the first two acts, and emphasizes the lack of independent agency that women were afforded even as mothers.

As the play progresses, we learn that all is not as it seems - to pay for the trip to Italy, and in order to save her husband's life from illness, Nora illegally forged her deceased father's signature on a loan agreement with the bank. Krogstad, a disgraced employee at the same bank Torvald works at, tells Nora that he is aware of this and will expose the crime to her husband unless she convinces Torvald to not fire him. Torvald refuses, saying that Krogstad committed a horrible offense in faking a signature on a check, an act which reveals his base dishonesty and hypocrisy. Hearing this, Nora goes ghost-white and pale with terror, contemplating the impact of

¹² For the sake of this analysis, the term "Victorian" will be used to refer to the society that informed the responses to *A Doll's House*. The Victorian era encapsulates British history between 1820 and 1914.

her own actions on her children, well intentioned as they were: “Hurt my children? Poison my home? That’s not true. Never in all the world!” (Ibsen 71). Even in this relatively early scene, Nora shows concern for her children and their innocence, emphasizing how she only committed the crime in the first place for the good of her family and her husband’s health.

As Krogstad’s blackmail seems more and more unavoidable, Nora continuously attempts to convince Torvald to give him his position back. Torvald repeatedly shuts her down, refusing to take her concerns seriously and reiterating that she, as his wife, should not worry about things beyond the home. Krogstad reveals that he’s written a letter that details Nora’s crime and that he’s put it in Torvald’s locked mailbox. A succession of scenes escalate in desperation as Nora ultimately feigns anxiety about an upcoming costume party performance, and distracts Torvald from retrieving his mail by begging him to help her rehearse. Appealing to Torvald’s (masculine) desire to be needed, Nora successfully keeps him with her for the whole evening by playing into this insecurity as well as returning to the childlike behavior exhibited earlier. Nora is terrified of her crime being revealed, despite her justifications in committing it, because it would shatter her reputation and by extension stain her children’s reputations.

In the final act, Torvald finally retrieves his mail, including the damning letter. As he retreats into a separate room to read it, Nora considers taking her life for the second time in the play: “oh, the freezing black water! The depths - down - Oh, I wish it were over...” (Ibsen 105). An enraged Torvald confronts Nora with her crime, claiming that he is now completely under Krogstad’s power. He laments the years he’s wasted on his wife, now exposed to him as a “hypocrite, a liar, a criminal” whom he no longer trusts to raise their children. The issue of reputation is still at the forefront, though - Torvald determines that Nora will still go on living in the house, but their marriage will only be a matter of appearances to preserve their image.

In a whiplash-inducing turnaround, a letter is delivered to Torvald from Krogstad - he has returned the incriminating evidence, and Torvald is ecstatic that they are saved. He forgives Nora, saying that a man's forgiveness makes his wife love him even more since it creates dependency upon the husband. Nora (and the audience by extension) here realizes that Torvald does not love his wife - he loves himself above all else, and his reputation; he ignores the near impossible choice that Nora had to make between her morals and his health, and her ensuing efforts to repay the loan. Torvald chalks the whole debacle up to her "foolishness", one of her most endearing traits (and further emphasizing how Torvald sees and dismisses Nora as childlike and helpless).

Up until this point Ibsen has portrayed Nora as a helpless, naive child; as a sensual manipulator; as well-intentioned criminal - but not yet as someone who completely breaks with the label of mother and wife. In this final scene, however, Nora utterly shatters the idyllic image as her dissatisfaction finally reaches catastrophic levels. She explodes on Torvald, creating a confrontational and climactic tableau that has become one of the most iconic scenes in theater.¹³

Nora: I've been your doll-wife here, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child.

And in turn the children have been my dolls. And I- how am I equipped to bring up my children? There's another job I have to do first. I have to try to educate myself. I have to stand completely alone, if I'm ever going to discover myself and the world out there. So I can't go on living with you.

Torvald: So you'll run out like this on your most sacred duties... your duties to your husband and children!

Nora: I have other duties equally sacred. Duties to myself.

¹³ The following lines have been edited for length and clarity; the full scene is pages 110 - 111.

Torvald: Before all else, you're a wife and a mother.

Nora: I don't believe in that anymore. I believe that, before all else, I'm a human being, no less than you - or anyway, I ought to try to become one.

(Ibsen 110-111).

Torvald continues to try to change Nora's mind, but she remains firm. She "stares straight at Torvald", "icily" responding to his feeble attempts (Ibsen 109). She has come to a realization, and now sees clearly the sham reality of her life - how dissatisfied and trapped she truly is, and how she has no sense of self. Any personhood has been subsumed beneath the layers of daughter, then wife, then mother, and she feels like nothing more than a doll, married to a stranger - she says "I could tear myself to bits!" with the agony of this epiphany (Ibsen 113). Ibsen makes it absolutely undeniable that Nora has been oppressed her entire life under these strict expectations, and that she is now breaking out of them. In the final few lines, she staunchly refuses any help Torvald offers to send her, and exits. Despondent and alone, Torvald sinks into a chair and looks around the house, which mere days ago was the very pinnacle of happy domesticity. He says her name, twice aloud, to no response. And then, clear and unmistakable: the sound of the door slamming shut.

"I might honestly say that it was for the sake of the last scene that the whole play was written", wrote Ibsen about his notorious ending (*Letters* 300). Nora's leaving represents both a literal and figurative rupture of patriarchal constraints and expectations of motherhood. The clear binaries of man and woman, public and private, and independent human being and mother-wife are shattered here. This ending was so controversial that it was changed in several subsequent productions. Critics were outraged at how Nora could walk out on her whole life - but most horrifying was the implication that she left her children. The "sacred duties" that Torvald so

firmly believed in were the nucleus of the Victorian family unit at the heart of society, and to have a woman so unapologetically place herself first caused moral outrage among critics.

The ending so explicitly challenged societal norms that several productions went as far as altering it to a “happier” resolution. In both the English and German debuts, *A Doll's House* was altered in order to more directly appeal to the audiences, as theater managers were skeptical about the popularity of a play with such a controversial conclusion. In England, the first production (in 1884) was titled *Breaking a Butterfly*, in which Nora convinced a clerk to steal the damning evidence from Krogstad's mail. Her evidence of her crime thus hidden, she did not leave her household, and the curtain fell upon a peaceful tableau with the rightful order of things restored. Of course, this change missed a crucial point of Ibsen's: Nora did not leave because her crime had been discovered, but rather because over the course of her anguish over the forgery she has discovered a fatal fracture and dissatisfaction that runs deeply down the center of her apparently idyllic life. Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman modified the ending to this happier version; upon elaboration, Jones stated that “a rough translation from the German version of *A Doll's House* was put into my hands, and I was told that if it could be turned into a sympathetic play, a ready opening would be found for it on the London boards” (Jones 24). In 1880, the actress slated to debut Nora on the German stage refused to perform the ending; it was subsequently altered so that Nora, before leaving, is shown to her children and changes her mind upon seeing them. She embraces them in tears as the curtain falls, and it's implied that her motherly love convinced her to stay (Baruch).

Ibsen was viscerally opposed to changes to the final scene of the play, calling the revisions a “barbaric outrage and act of violence against the play” (Ibsen, *Letters*). It's clear that the ending was a crucial touchstone in Ibsen's criticism of 19th century gender roles and the

obligations placed upon women, and without it, the challenge of societal norms is significantly depleted. The original version of *A Doll's House* was eventually performed in England, beginning in 1889, and sparked vicious criticism among male reviewers and a simultaneous unprecedented boom in popularity among female Londoners; these reactions shall be analyzed shortly.

Ibsen's commentary on women's independence and self-sufficiency take on an additional cast in light of contemporary legal developments in English Victorian society. Similar to how *By the Bog of Cats* was performed against a backdrop of the recent legalization of divorce, two years before the first performance of the unaltered version of *A Doll's House* Parliament passed a revised version of the Married Women's Property Act. The original act, ratified in 1882, made it possible for women to buy and hold property, and to be treated as legal individuals separate from their husbands or fathers. The 1887 amendment made provisions to treat women as disparate entities from their husbands in financial and material property matters. In practice, this made women solely responsible for their own debt - by extension, it also detached them from the debt of their husbands. The 1882 introduction of the law was a stark contrast to the earlier realities of English law, wherein women could only hold property in very specific circumstances, and were certainly not afforded rights of ownership in legal battles. By 1889, when Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was first shown in its unaltered state, only seven years had passed - it was still very much a novel circumstance, and would have been relatively recent in the collective memory of the audience. Like the Irish divorce debates, allowing women to hold property was the subject of fiercely divided public opinion; it ultimately afforded women increased independence and financial freedom.

English attendees would have thus seen Nora denouncing the structures that force her to be dependent on her husband, as well as the pressure of her own secret debt and loan repayment. In the context of a society that only very recently allowed women property rights. Nora's struggles are directly tied to her lack of freedom and self-sufficiency (and contribute to her self-image of a "doll"). Ibsen's play drew these issues to the forefront, and unavoidably presented an image of a wife and mother who is driven to an extreme choice by a society that denies her any degree of independence.

While legal developments in the late 1800s are emblematic of an apparent shift towards a more equitable gender dynamic, social customs were progressing rather slower. The reactions to Nora's leaving, both in the play itself and in responses to the play, reflect the patriarchal characterization of women who refuse motherhood and social obligations. Her departure is decried as "madness" by Torvald, who throughout the play refuses to take Nora seriously. Prior to the climactic ending scene, Torvald refers to Nora as his "lark" and his "squirrel", using her dependence on him and her childlike naiveté to bolster his own ego. He does not allow her a chance to argue for Krogstad, cutting her off bluntly. And Nora is aware of this - from early on, when she laments "no one takes me seriously", and coming full circle when she precedes the news about her imminent departure with "we've never sat down seriously together" (Ibsen 70, 109). To Torvald, Nora is indeed a "doll": the ideal wife and mother, a model inhabitant of their perfect slice of domesticity but nothing beyond that. He calls her breaking of social norms "madness"; early critics of *A Doll's House* called it the unrealistic ravings of a hysterical woman. In both cases, Nora is not taken seriously, her sufferings diminished to the irrational responses of an overly emotional feminine personality. Her departure condemns the structure that placed her in such a situation. Ibsen is directly challenging a society that expects women to be mothers and

wives but nothing beyond that, and certainly not to concern themselves with things outside of a very limited sphere of domesticity.

Nora's condemnation of her marriage as a sham and an inherently unbalanced partnership functions as a wider critique of society at the time, when marriages were less about affection and more about status, and forced women into roles that relegated their value to reputations and appearances. Just as Euripides, and later Carr, used the main tension between the couple in the play to comment on the disproportionate power balances between men and women, Ibsen wrote the incendiary final speech as a direct callout of a society that oppresses women to mothers at the expense of their happiness and independence. In reducing women to mothers, the patriarchal power structure also relegates them to sources of amusement and entertainment, like ornaments that serve to emulate the status of their husbands. Wives in the middle-upper class household, like Nora, were barely more than decoration. Thorsten Veblen, in "The Theory of the Leisure Class," proposed that upper class members of society display their wealth via materialistic items including clothes and excessive spending, a behavior he terms "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 30). The importance of Veblen's argument in the context of *A Doll's House* and the reduction of women to value-objects is his emphasis on *appearance*. Entwined with reputation, the position of women was to indicate the success of their husbands. Nora's position as the ideal mother and wife in the domestic paradise of their home serves to mark Torvald as a successful paradigm of masculine authority and achievement.

In addition to the harmful marriages and false appearances like the ones that Nora is trapped in, Ibsen also directly critiques the idea that women are obligated to be mothers. As the reactions of interest are to the English performances of Ibsen's play, the social view of maternity described here is that which dominated British society (although, of course, there were little

variations throughout Western Europe societies, including Ibsen's native Norway). Motherhood in *A Doll's House* is described as a sacred duty by Torvald, and indeed that was how Victorian society saw maternity. By this point in this multi-pronged analysis of terrible mothers, it will come as no surprise that Victorian society first and foremost saw women as an extension of their reproductive abilities. It was expected and rarely questioned that women would wed - crucially, this was mostly aimed at "respectable" bourgeois women. The previous discussion of conspicuous consumption comes into play here, again, as it was also a strictly social class-related behavior. To have the requisite wealth to display and therefore exhibit conspicuous consumption, women tended to be of the upper-middle and upper class. Correspondingly, it was a sign of success and status to be able to keep a wife at home, and not having to be self-sufficient or find a source of income; whose duties were solely to act as a mother to children, receive guests, and to put it bluntly, sit still and look pretty. Thus, these women were held to these expectations of child-bearing, motherhood, and reputation-improving, and as a result their autonomy was denied. In the latter half of the 1800s, nascent feminist movements were beginning to challenge this, albeit their rumblings were still nearly entirely underground. Ibsen's audacious portrayal of a woman like Nora who chooses to reject the heavy mantle of motherhood in favor of her own personal growth went against societal customs in essentially every way imaginable.

The central female paradigm that presided over Victorian society and informed cultural norms was one that elevated the wife and mother to near-mythic status, propagating an idealized image of the angelic mother who uncomplainingly fulfilled the needs of her husband and children. Nora of course embodies this image throughout the first parts of the play - she inhabits the structural boundaries of wife-mother nearly perfectly, which makes her irreversible rejection of them at the end all the more striking.

The continued existence of English society (that privileged men) was dependent on the strict dichotomy that dictated gender roles. Men worked outside the home, had the rights to property and to earn significant sums, and to independence and agency, while respectable women inhabited the domestic sphere and took on the mantle of housework and child-raising. The obligation of motherhood served to keep women strictly within these boundaries, and thus continue to support the structures that allowed for the rise of men at the expense of women. Nora's leaving troubles the established roles, as she literally and figuratively steps out of them. This partly serves to explain the aforementioned attempts by critics to characterize her as hysterical and irrational. By denying the legitimacy of Nora's reasons for leaving and her exclamation that she's "been wronged greatly" by the men in her life, British critics could easily dismiss her arguments and Ibsen's criticism of gender roles. In turn, this represents a refusal to acknowledge the underlying societal problems inherent in the unequal British social structure, as such an acknowledgement would demand a remedy of the issues, and therefore bring about a total restructuring of society. Of course, this restructure would balance out the disproportionate power that allowed men to enjoy privileges denied to women, and bring patriarchal society crashing down.

This is a dramatic leap to make, of course, but nevertheless sums up the societal context that surrounded Nora's debut on English stages; her abandonment of husband, children, and home threatens the patriarchal power structure that depends on women staying in these roles, and thus gave rise to a type of damage control that attempted to discredit her and what she represented in any way possible. Several responses to the play endeavored to do so by placing the blame on Nora, for being a terrible and monstrous mother and therefore an unsympathetic character. "I ask you directly", implored M.W. Brun, a theater manager and critic, "is there one

mother among thousands of mothers, one wife among thousands of wives, who could behave as Nora behaves, who would desert husband, children, and home merely in order to become 'a human being'?"¹⁴ Brun goes on to argue that Nora does not deserve our sympathy, as she is filled with an unreasonable hatred and “unnatural” revulsion towards her children and therefore represents a fundamental moral failing: a mother who does not love her children. In the context of a society that so emulated motherhood as a paragon of virtue and achievement, it is no wonder that a character perceived as antimotherly received such a negative review.

And yet, Nora does not leave out of hate for her children - that would be a condemning portrayal of an irrationally vengeful woman and legitimize the critics. Instead, Ibsen makes it clear that she is leaving because she does not believe herself to be a *good* mother, thus putting the blame back on a society that makes it impossible for women to define themselves outside of these roles. She doesn't deny that her children are sacred, but she rebels against the idea that women are mothers to the exclusion of all other identities (“I have other duties *equally sacred*”). Nora clearly cares for her children, often lovingly interacting with them throughout the play, and her leaving is thus reflective of a sense of maternal protectiveness. She is not going to subject them to a “doll” of a mother, to the same false house of cards she has been laboring within for so long. Instead, she strongly feels that she cannot be a mother to the children without understanding who she is beyond that maternal obligation: “I know they're in better hands than mine. The way I am now, I'm no use to them” (Ibsen 113).

Ibsen therefore does not portray this mother abandoning her children as irredeemable, but out of a sense of protectiveness and towards a greater good. Like Medea killing her children (and claiming their bodies), and Hester's refusal to leave Josie behind, Nora rejects typical

¹⁴ Quoted in *Folkets Avis*, Dec. 24th, 1879 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), further cited in Marker, Frederick and Lise-Lone.

constructs of motherhood to rework what maternal protectiveness can look like. However gruesome and condemnable the final act is, the motivations behind them were not out of irrational revenge but out of an attempt to protect their children, emphasized through the playwrights' illustrating the oppressive forces pushing these women to these actions. Of course, in the patriarchal view, a mother who chooses to *stop* being a mother is inconceivable at best and monstrous at worst, which partly explains the vitriolic protestations with which Medea-like figures have historically been met.. Crucially, though, these women do not cease being mothers through the act of infanticide or abandonment - they are doing it to protect their children in a world that affords mothers very little, if any, agency. The (male) reactions to these antimothers stem from a very specific and constraining idea of motherhood and the "correct" way to mother.

In *A Doll's House*, the open ending - ambiguous in terms of what life Nora found for herself beyond the four walls of her dollhouse - is not a condemnation, and the only concrete fact Ibsen leaves the audience with is that Nora left, that she is free. The Euripidean echo thus sounds again: Medea killed her children to protect them from a life of exile, and while Nora obviously does not commit this infanticide, she still commits a kind of murder in excising herself from her children's lives for their own sake. Arguably, it could even be a matricide, or a suicide - a murdering of the mother that Torvald and her children viewed her as, and on a wider scale, the maternal figure society expects her to be. Despite not physically harming anyone, Nora was still damned in countless moral crusades following her debut. Compared to the Medeas and the Hesters, Nora is not murderous, and certainly not monstrous in the same way. Thus, the virulent damnation she faces is a result of a society that uncompromisingly pigeon-holes women into particular roles of mother and wife, and ostracizes those who challenge them, regardless of the varying intensity of their crimes.

A crucial aspect of the oppression Nora faces has to do with the emphasis placed on reputation. As mentioned, women are expected to inhabit a very specific role, and to do so in a certain way that did not threaten the overarching male power structure. A large part of this is appearances and reputation. Virtue and the idea of propriety were inherently tied to women's value; a woman who steps outside what propriety dictates or acts immorally is condemned. Medea, to an Athenian audience, was monstrous because she was not virtuous nor subservient, and defied convention; Nora similarly evoked strong backlash because of her refusal to conform. Nora, prior to her epiphany in the final act, is constantly agonized over her reputation and the annihilation of it, should her crime be revealed.

There is thus a type of constant performance that Nora (and "proper" mothers) are expected to emulate. This is visibly reflected in a scene in Act 2, when Nora - desperate to distract Torvald from reading the incriminating letter - persuades him to stay with her by begging for help with rehearsal in preparation for a costume party. Nora is preparing to dance a tarantella at the party, a very quick-paced dance characterized by rapid twirling. She performs the role of a childlike figure who needs her husband to help her, and then works herself into a frenzy with "her hair loosened and falling over her shoulders", dancing "more and more wildly" in front of Torvald (fig. 4). Even after all is revealed, Torvald's concern is first and foremost with maintaining the image of his perfect wife: "all that matters is saving the bits and pieces, the appearances..." (Ibsen 106). Similarly, following Nora's declaration that she is leaving, he exclaims "you're not even thinking what people will say!". Torvald does not care for Nora's own happiness and only sees her as a way to further his own reputation, even in the face of her clear sufferings. While Nora is originally willing to do anything to save her own reputation, by the end of the play she is firmly committed to figuring out who she is beyond the performance



Figure 4: Nora practicing her whirling tarantella performance for Torvald, purposefully making it excessively wild in order to persuade Torvald that she is in need of his direction.

Photo Information: Gretchen Hall as Nora Helmer (center) with (from left) Fred Arsenault as Torvald Helmer, Jack Koenig as Dr. Rank and Nisi Sturgis as Mrs. Kristine Linde in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, translated and adapted by Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey. Directed by Kirsten Brandt, March 23 - April 21, 2013 at The Old Globe, London. Photo by Henry DiRocco. Courtesy of The Old Globe Press Archive. Accessed 9 March 2020.

of false appearances, as she tells Torvald “I can’t be concerned about that anymore” (Ibsen 110).

This persistent requirement to perform - as a wife, as a mother, as an innocent and foolish woman - to maintain her reputation and her life (lacking though it may be), and its connection to the gender dynamics critiqued by Ibsen, can be further analyzed through Judith Butler’s pivotal essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” Butler argues that gender is inherently performative, “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 5). As it is a constructed identity, it can therefore be *reconstructed*. It presents the opportunity to rework the harmful gender binaries that, in relevance to *A Doll’s House*, subjugate and oppress women.

Nora’s departure was threatening because it directly called out issues in a society whose stability is based on the continuation of the power imbalance that *caused* those issues. Butler’s argument that existing norms can be broken down and rebuilt in a new way therefore further explains the attempts to dismiss Nora’s actions as foolish and unfounded. By abandoning her life, Nora overturns the stability of her household and family, and on a wider scale indicates Ibsen’s implicit challenge to those watching: that society can be reworked in a more equitable way that rectifies these gender injustices, a deconstruction that Nora initiates by leaving. Nora’s gender and character is formed by prescribed actions and assigned characteristics that society attributes to women, but the unsustainable performativity creates a doll-like existence.

Additionally, Butler theorizes that to be seen as a woman in the eyes of society, one has to *become* a woman through certain acts, to “compel the body to conform to an historical idea of woman”. The obligation to become a mother was so deeply entrenched in society that women who rejected it, like Nora and all the various Medea-kind, were seen as unnatural. The “historical idea of woman” is a direct extension of the male figures in her life, as daughter, wife, and mother; women as defined socially and culturally barely existed without these labels. Thus the

term “monstrous mother” comes into play to describe the women who refuse to “compel the body” (Butler 522). They are monstrous, somehow less than human as perceived by the patriarchal gaze; as Butler states, their gender is constructed by repeated acts that determine their relationships and demand a constant state of performance.

Ibsen’s portrayal of Nora and her ultimate unapologetic abandonment of the performativity and empty life was so clearly against societal norms. Just like Euripides’ Medea and Carr’s Hester, Nora offended the sensibilities and morals of 19th century audiences on nearly every level possible. From corrupting the sacrosanctity of motherhood to breaking the law, Nora represented an immoral woman. It will come as no surprise, therefore, that critics entrenched in these customary expectations reacted viciously and negatively to *A Doll’s House*.

The predominant criticisms of *A Doll’s House* revolved around Nora’s abandonment of her motherly duties in leaving her children behind. That said, they could (and did) accept her action given that it was altered to a resolution that maintained the proper status-quo, such as the modified endings that had an apologetic Nora returning to her children and husband. Once the original ending, starting in 1889, dominated the British stage, though, the unapologetic nature of her departure and Ibsen’s sympathetic portrayal truly invoked critics’ ire. Reviewers of its English debut - which, at the time, were essentially all men - were left bewildered at best and outraged at worst by the time the slamming door reverberated around the theater. We have already seen the attempts to discredit Nora through returning to the misogynistic, age-old technique of dismissing her as hysterical and irrational, which was representative of the larger reactions from male critics. As men in a male-privileging patriarchal society, they could not understand Nora nor could they legitimize her actions and sufferings, and therefore reacted with unfavorable reviews.

The responses were not all negative, however, and the differing opinions fell largely along gender divisions. Following the opening of *A Doll's House* in London, women flocked to the theater in unprecedented numbers. While critics including the *New York Times* saw Nora as a "peculiar, eccentric woman" whose actions made it so that no one could possibly "understand or sympathize" with her, this sudden influx of women indicated the exact opposite (Schnebly, 12). Nora represented a very pertinent reality for the watching mothers and women as a whole, and her portrayal - one that did not damn her for feeling unfulfilled in her prescribed social roles - allowed women to validate their own situations. Additionally, the significance of the popularity among women extended beyond the simple fact that they attended: they attended *alone*, or in groups without male chaperones (Barstow). This was a relatively new aspect of theatergoing, as women previously attended with men nearly exclusively, and the crowds of women who flooded into playhouses to watch Nora grace the stage represented a shift. Many male critics, in addition to objecting to Nora's characterization and reasoning, also commented on the experience of seeing the play itself in this new type of audience (Barstow; Templeton).

Although critics acknowledged the popularity of Ibsen's play among women, they were bewildered by it, as the sympathetic portrayal of a woman who rejects motherhood was incomprehensible to most reviewers. One early response stated that the "marvel of [Ibsen's] notorious influence over feminine minds becomes all the greater when it is considered that his characterizations of womankind deny her the highest attributes of her nature, whether as maiden, wife or mother" (Goldsmith 6). The patriarchal response to this unprecedented feminine attention was that women loved *A Doll's House* and Nora *in spite of*, not *because*, of the way that Ibsen so genuinely portrayed the dissatisfaction felt among Victorian wives and mothers. Of course, the opposite was true: Nora (and Ibsen) gave a voice to those who typically did not have one, and

just as she questioned her apparently idyllic life, so too did the women who stuffed the mezzanines and balconies of *A Doll's House* productions fit to bursting.

Euripides and Marina Carr both challenged the male-centric views of motherhood by forcing their audiences to confront the violent and bloody images on stage. These spectators recognized themselves in the harmful aspects of societies that pushed already marginal women, like the foreign Medea and the traveler Hester, to horrific choices. By contrast, *A Doll's House's* extraordinary popularity among women reflects how the story of Nora (a housewife, a mother, *not* an outsider) allowed women to see themselves on stage to an unprecedented degree. The ending exacerbated this recognition. In a society that automatically characterizes the everywoman as a mother, such a character rejecting it in such a rational way makes it possible. It is not the same abject bloodshed that characterizes other Medea-kinds, but in the particular social context of *A Doll's House*, was all the more shocking for it. In contrast to infanticide, which seems unimaginable without descending to the depths of utmost horror, Nora's (relatively) tamer rebellion resonates as something an ordinary woman could do. Nora is a wife and a mother in an upper-middle class setting, with extremely close parallels to the demographics of the audience. This stage-audience recognition in turn threatened existing power structures, a perceived challenge perfectly encapsulated in the emergence and subsequent characterization of the "matinee girl".

Matinee girls, as they were first termed by newspapers in London beginning in 1885, were young girls who attended the theater out of a genuine love for the theater and the players (Barstow). They elicited a stronger reaction than their fellow, older women theater-goers, partly because of their rambunctious behavior and tendency to loudly praise (or insult) the actors on stage. The matinee girl's presence in the theaters indicated, to the male observer, a gradual shift

in society that allowed these young girls to attend alone, and especially to observe Nora throw off the mantle of motherhood and “proper” feminine characteristics. In a reaction that interestingly parallels Torvald’s patronization and selfishly-motivated protectiveness of Nora, contemporary writers often attempted to justify their aversion to matinee girls with a sense of righteousness: “It is enough to make a man burn with shame and indignation to see hundreds of girls sitting in the theater, and, with open mouths, literally drinking in remarks and conversations to which no young girl in her teens should listen” (Bok 16).

The images presented on stage, from the sexual tension in the Tarantella dance scene to Nora’s climactic denouncing of her harmful and empty life, were seen as threatening to society and therefore, something young women should not be exposed to. The matinee girls were emblematic of the challenge that Nora posed to social customs, and caused a stir because of their implicit potential to embody the foundation-shaking type of abandonment that Nora represents. Imagine this veritable army of young girls using Nora as a model, as an inspiration to refuse to step into the places that society has constructed for them; all of these matinee girls slamming the proverbial door on motherhood and subservient, unbalanced marriages in favor of finding some essential selfhood! What, then, would remain of the familial structure, the very nucleus of Victorian society? Such were the concerns and societal preconceptions that informed the reactions to matinee girls and to the unprecedented popularity of *A Doll’s House* amongst the women of London.

Since the 1879 Norwegian debut of Nora and the 1889 explosion onto English stages, *A Doll’s House* has been revived and reimagined countless times. If *A Doll’s House* is seen as a deliberately reimagined and transformed *Medea*, a new manner of critiquing the boxes into which society places mothers, then it can in turn be viewed as the inspiration for a new genre of

antimothers, who rebel in earthly and possible ways as opposed to the hideous infanticides. The gender-specific reactions and responses to Nora and her struggles speak to the state of society in the late 1800s; the continued restagings of the play speak to the ongoing relevancy of issues--the problematic imposition of particular roles on women at the expense of their happiness. Euripides did this with the monstrous pity in *Medea*, and Marina Carr achieved it through the unavoidable Irishness of Hester's bog. With all three terrible mothers, the audience cannot possibly disconnect the tensions presented in the tragedies to their own realities. Henrik Ibsen knew exactly what he was doing with such a sympathetic portrayal of a woman who, manipulated like a doll her whole life, finally abandoned the most crucial tenants of society and femininity. Nora was directly and undeniably a reflection of society's ills. As Ibsen said in one of his last explanatory letters:

“Everything that I have written is intimately connected with what I have lived through, even if I have not lived it myself. Every new work has served me as emancipation and catharsis; for none of us can escape *the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which we belong.*” (Ibsen, *Notes.*)¹⁵

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

Coda

To Face the Unthinkable

*“A day will come when the story changes,
then shall the glory of women resound,
and reverence come to the gender of woman,
reversing at last the sad reputation of ladies.”¹⁶*

-Euripides

In February 2020, a “new” version *Medea* premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, marking the second staging of the tragedy in less than two decades. Directed and written by Simon Stone, the contemporary rewrite changed the names of the characters, threw them into an ambiguous modern urban setting, gave the sons names and personalities, and leaned heavily on electronic and mixed-media aspects. I attended in mid-February, and sat about halfway back in the strange bleacher-like orchestra seating of BAM’s Harvey Theater. The set was glaringly, aggressively clean - white floor, white backdrop, two winged white walls bookending the stage. Prior to curtain, as the audience filled in the seats piecemeal, a young boy lay near the lip, downstage center, playing aimlessly on a tablet while a taller boy leaned against the stage left wing wall.

Rose Byrne took up the mantle of Medea (Anna here) for this production, and if destiny is real, then she was destined to play this character, easily stealing the attention in every scene. Her dizzying swings between chaotic insanity, dangerous genius, betrayed anger, and grief-stricken sobs created a Medea who could just have easily been on a stage in ancient Athens as in New York in 2020 (or Ireland in 1998, or Norway in the late 1800s). The clean white set

¹⁶ *Medea*, trans. Paul Roche. First Choral Ode, Strophe 1.

became increasingly sullied as the tragedy progressed - first by wine, then blood, then by a slowly falling stream of ash that steadily sped up as the final, point-of-no-return scenes unfolded. Anna killed her children by poison - a nod to Medea's sorceress background - and then ingested the same concoction, before setting her house on fire. She lay on the ground and drew her children to her, singing them to sleep as the fatal poison took hold. The fire roared and the ash fell faster, the stage now completely dirtied.

When the Jason character finally found them, he fell to his knees in the ash, downstage center, where his son had so innocently started the show - before the clean, white set was so inexorably corrupted. A partition lowered in front of the bodies, splitting the father from the wife and children, as a solemn voice-over narrated how Jason collapsed upon seeing the dead family, overcome with the agonizing knowledge that it was his own actions that pushed Medea to this bloody end. And then the lights dimmed, and a blanket-like silence fell.

The audience, in the way of audiences in all theaters, took a few seconds to process that it was now time for applause, that the horrific violence we had just watched performed was just that- a performance, and one that was now over. I stood to join the appreciative ovation, still reeling from the last awful image of three dead bodies draped on and over each-other, a mother holding her children close even after she killed them.

"Why are we clapping?" The woman behind me whispered this to her companion in a bewildered undertone, even as her hands hesitantly joined the chorus of applause. Her partner responded *"we aren't really clapping for what happened, but for the performance itself"*. I lost the rest of their conversation in the cacophony, but this snippet of dialogue has stayed with me since, especially as I sought to engage with questions of society, stagings, and reactions, and how they are all connected. Can we so cleanly separate a performance from the actions that it

portrays? Can theater ever truly disengage from the surrounding realities? It is impossible to see, or stage, a theatrical performance without embedding personal social conceptions, no matter how subconscious they may be. The confused woman behind me at BAM that cold February night inadvertently exemplified this entanglement - why *should* we clap for a tragedy, for a woman pushed so inexorably off the deep end but who nevertheless had moments of clarity; moments where the audience could glimpse their own situations in her struggles? And what does it mean that we *did* clap? Is the applause for Medea herself, for the production alone, or for some inseparable combination of the two? After all, it is a horrible thing to see play out, and nevertheless *Medea* continues to be staged, over, and over, and over again.

The New York Times review of the 2020 BAM production, actual content aside, declared in large, uniformly capital letters in the heading that the director “FACED THE UNTHINKABLE, AND YOU SHOULD TOO” (Soliski). Medea in her foreign Corinth, Hester in her swamp, and Nora in her doll’s house all did more than face the unthinkable. These mothers *lived* it. And that is the crux of the unique essence of Medea, the reason she has withstood two millennia of social and cultural shifts: behind the immediate horror-filled reactions at the monstrous act of murdering children and casting off motherly obligations, audiences can see *why* she does what she does. It is not that we excuse it, but rather that we can *understand* it, and in doing so, we face the unthinkable: that it is not solely the anti-mother herself who frightens and fascinates, but the realization that she could be any woman, and the unavoidable acknowledgement that a society reliant on these types of destructive pressures to survive is an inherently unstable one.

Analyzing the responses within the social contexts of these versions of *Medea* have shown how, despite the differences in locations and time periods, there is a continuous

expectation placed on women to be mothers. Thus, the negative reactions to women who reject it are a result of unbalanced power dynamics that depend on these expectations to sustain the patriarchal structure. It is the disregard for women like Medea, Hester, and Nora, who are seen as “unnatural” mothers, and the marginalization of their very real struggles, that leads to horrific consequences.

Beyond the stage and beyond even *Medea* in particular, the “unthinkable” extends to additional works. Nora exemplified this expanded motif of the antimother, and new plays like *Anatomy of a Suicide* continue to emphasize the ongoing relevancy.¹⁷ Mothers and their sufferings continue to fascinate and repulse audiences, invoking intense responses along the way. As long as there are women, as long as there are *mothers*, there will be Medeas, and there will be audiences for them.

¹⁷ *Anatomy of a Suicide* was staged at Atlantic Theater Company in New York City from February 1st to March 15th, 2020, written by Alice Birch and directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz. It follows three generations of women as they struggle with wanting to be a mother, their own addictions and mental health issues, and refusing to have children despite the continued pressure of society and family.

Appendix

The following images come from additional productions and adaptations of *Medea*, excluding those discussed in this thesis. They visually emphasize the vast diversity of Medea portrayals, and the enduring global fascination with this anti-mother.



Franco Branciaroli as Medea, in the 2017 revival of a 1996 version, directed by Luca Ronconi, in Brescia, Italy.



Photo by Umberto Favretto.

Adria Santana as Medea in *Medea sueña Corinto*, written by Abelardo Estorino and directed by Abelardo Estorino. Premiered in 2008 at Sala Teatro Adolfo Llauradó, Cuba. Photo by Jorge Luis Baños.



Vivian Reed and Audra McDonald in *Marie Christine*, a loose musical adaptation of *Medea* set in New Orleans and Chicago in the 1890s. Performed at the Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, New York, from October 28th, 1999 to January 9th 2020, directed by Graciela Daniela and written by Michael John Lachiusa.
Photo by Joan Marcus.



Georgette Lockwood in *Medea*, directed by Mark Stringham at the Classic Theatre of San Antonio, from November 6th - November 29th 2015. Photo by Siggie Ragnan, 2015. Courtesy of the Classic Theatre of San Antonio.



Micari as the titular character in Satoshi Miyagi's production of *Medea*, in Shizuoka, Japan. Photo by Takuma Uchida, 2011. Courtesy of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center.



Park Ae-Ri as Medea in a production by the National Changgeuk Company of Korea. Directed by Seo Jae-hyung at the National Theater of Korea from October 1st - 5th, 2014, Seoul. Photo courtesy of the National Changgeuk Company of Korea.



Christine O'Leary as Medea in an adaptation by Suzie Miller and directed by Todd Macdonald, performed in Brisbane, Australia, at Roundhouse Theatre from May 30th - June 20th, 2015. Photo by Dylan Evans.



Sarah Connolly in *Médée* directed by David McVicar at the English National Opera in a production of the 1693 opera by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, February 15th - March 16th 2013. Photo by Clive Barda.



Sojourner Zenobia Wright as Medea in *Medea with Child*, written by Janet Burroway and directed by Jonathan Green at La Costa Theatre in Chicago, March 14- April 25th 2010. Photo Courtesy of Sideshow Theater Company.



Blanca Portillo in *Medea* directed by Tomaz Pandur, which ran from 2012 to 2014 in various venues and festivals throughout Croatia and internationally. Photo Courtesy of the Croatian National Theatre.



Helen McCrory as Medea at the National Theatre, London, directed by Carrie Cracknell and adapted by Ben Power into a quasi-musical, composed by Will Gregory and Alison Goldfrapp. From July 14th - September 4th 2014.
Photo by Dave Bennet.

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