

By the bog of destitution: in conversation with Marina Carr*

K: Your work fits perfectly with the issues raised in our call for papers on Medea and the destituent power especially as far as the main characters of *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) are concerned. Let’s talk about Hester to begin with. Hester brings destruction in the drama is a human figure or a figure going far beyond humanity?

Marina Carr: That’s a very interesting question, Hester as human and beyond human. Because my influence or my inspiration for Hester is Medea and we know that she is the granddaughter of Helios the sun and he is sending her a chariot at the end of the play. In *By the Bog of Cats* there’s always that element not so much an element of superhuman but an element of beyond the rational or beyond how we expect people to think and to feel, and to react and to behave and I think she is at the outer edge of humanity in terms of those. Then you look at all the women in the Greek plays and they seem to be at the outer reaches of humanity. They are huge figures in the canon of literature that have come down to us; they are wonderful orators. They take power because power was never given to them and they will that power in extraordinary ways, sometimes in ways that we find very difficult to apply to the moral law which we try to live by in the world. So, in that sense there is something in their idea of justice, in their idea of truth that is not of the laws of man. If you think of Antigone and you think of her argument that there are laws here and then there are divine laws, there are natural laws and then there are the law courts. I suppose it all goes back to the Euminides and the *Oresteia* and that first law court where Athena has the final casting vote and she votes to allow Orestes be exonerated from the crime of killing his mother. And I think that

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Marina Carr is an award-winning playwright. Born in County Offaly, she is a graduate of University College Dublin. Ms. Carr’s plays include: *Ullaloo*, 1989; *Low in the Dark*, 1991; *The Mai*, 1994; *Portia Coughlan*, 1996; *By the Bog of Cats*, 1998; *On Raftery’s Hill*, 1999; *Ariel*, 2000; *Woman and Scarecrow*, 2004; *The Cordelia Dream*, 2006; *Marble*, 2007; *16 Possible Glimpses*, 2009; *Hecuba*, 2015; *The Boy*, 2020; *iGirl*, 2021. Carr’s plays have been translated into many languages and produced around the world. Marina Carr is on the faculty of the School of English at Dublin City University and has taught at Trinity College, at Villanova University, and at Princeton University. In the Fall 2018 semester, she was a Visiting Fellow at the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, the University of Notre Dame’s Keough School of Global Affairs. She is published by The Gallery Press, Nick Hern Books, and Faber & Faber. Her most recent play *Girl on Altar* has opened in May 2022 at the Kiln Theatre in London. The play retells the Greek myth of Clytemnestra.

our argument is not that he is innocent, nobody thinks he is innocent but that the law must start somewhere. Other people have discussed this and I think this is a very important point: that the law begins, human laws or the first law courts, with a judgement where a crime against a woman is not punished. In a sense we are living out that crime's first judgement since. In the sense that there seems to be an imbalance: if you think for a second if the law began with the punishment of Orestes for his crime against his mother, not that anybody wants Orestes to be punished, I think, it is quite terrifying for what, ideally, he has been through and he is justified in many ways for the idea of the law beginning where that crime is kind of left aside, it is like now that is where we are going to start the law. So, in a sense, what the law is saying is: it is not okay to kill anyone but if you must kill someone it is a little bit more okay, to kill a woman. So, I think that when you talk about the superhuman in Medea there are echoes of that subconsciously, because I was never literally thinking about it while I was writing but I have thought a lot about it since. What you are talking about with these Greek women and these three big tragedians, what they are examining is balance and readdressing balance and justice for all, not just for the elite, not just for the patriarchs. If you go back to the polis and that little city state it lasted around 90 years, that was it. All those wonderful things that we try to live by; truth, beauty, the good, the ideal. They were all there even before but they weren't articulated so brilliantly, they weren't excavated. The polis lasting ninety years and look at what has come down to us from that experiment. But at the time the only ones who had any sense of privilege or freedom were the rulers, were the men. So, if you were a child, a slave or a woman none of these virtues or laws really applied to you. I think that is at the heart of the rage that erupts in these Greek plays.



Fig. 1 Olwen Fouéré as Hester in the world premiere of *By the Bog of Cats* directed by Patrick Mason (Abbey Theatre, Dublin 1998)

K: This idea of the origin of rage in Greek women is extremely interesting. Can we trace the attempt to go beyond the human in the relationship with the swan? Is it a sort of doppelgänger? A way of creating humanity via animals as if human beings cannot really give her that.

M. C.: In Irish culture the swan is considered the soul bird, so her connection is that, in a way that is her soul, and the Irish mythology is full of these references: The children of Lir¹, Zeus, “Leda and the Swan”

¹ The story of the Children of Lir is one of the best-known tales of Ireland. This story tells of Lir and his wife Aobh and their four children called Aodh, Fionnghuala, Fiachra and Conn. Lir's wife died and he married again. His new wife was called Aoife and she became the children's stepmother. At first, she loved them dearly but after a time she grew jealous of their father's affection for them. One day she bore them away and put them under a spell. They were turned into four white swans at Lake Derravarragh in County Westmeath. They remained there for four hundred years. Then they flew away and settled on the Sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland, where they stayed for three hundred years in cold and misery. From there they spent three years in Erris, County Mayo where they endured even further sorrow. At the end of that time they returned to their old home at Sídh Fionnachaidh in County Armagh. Their father was long dead and the place was desolate and empty. They flew off again to Erris and there met the Christian Missionary, St. Mochaomhóg who treated them with great kindness. At last their period of enchantment came to an end and they were turned into three withered old men and an old woman. The saint baptised them and they died peacefully. They were buried together. The story of the Children of Lir is based on a legend which reached Ireland from Britain or from France at the end of the Middle Ages.

(1924) the great Yeats poem. And you have this whole conversation with the natural world and is very, it is just very normal for someone like Hester to have that relation. I think that until very recently people who grew up in the country had a very different relation with nature, with the sky, with the sea, with the fields, with the animals, with the birds and you are more 'there' I think. In the city you hardly know your neighbours, you may know some of them but you are one of many. In the country there is somehow an ability to relate, I think and for one's spiritual sense of that to be magnified and for things to mean things, like to know what kind of a tree this is, or what a lake is called, place names, to know what bird that is or to know what flower that is which is a part of the lore of your life if you are immersed in that kind of landscape and you are more connected. So, for Hester you can throw all the mythical significance you want to that, but it is just a swan. It is just this animal she has known since childhood and it is this bird which is there when she returns to the bog. And then there is this story of her mother, putting here in the swan's lair the night she was born, that connection. The way in which I think about it is that there is so much hidden knowledge about it that is there that we seem to ignore, the world after the industrial revolution, all of that was thrown aside. And it is a bit like Oedipus's folly, that man is the measure of all things, women are the measure of all things, we are the measure of all things and the world according to us. It goes into all sort of areas, we are late on the planet, we won't be here for much longer, the earth is a very old, old place. There so much history and knowledge, the version of *homo sapiens* that has been here, apparently there has been six or seven version of the human to date, that were here all cohabiting, how come that we came to the fore? How come we managed to do away with all the others? We intermarried with them or we raped them or ate them, whatever we did. And it is just what love carries and then what rational discourse allows, all that stuff that is in our gene pool, in our DNA, in our make-up that seems a lot of the time inexplicable and it can be very, very powerful if we can find a map to try and decipher what that is. It is all what we call the supernatural or the myth, whatever it is, elements that make up our beings that we cannot explain, cannot control, cannot understand and yet they are part of us. We are what we are, a little bit of sky that we have. If we are honest, we probably feel everything first and then we begin to think. That when something happens to you, that something unexpected happens to you, you feel it first and it may take you days, weeks, months, years for you to understand what that thing was that happened. It can be as simple as a conversation you had with somebody and somebody said something etcetera that impacted you in some way which you can't understand and months later somebody else says something and you say "oh, that's what it was, that is the reason why I was so upset even if at the time I did not understand." It is that we have all this knowledge in the body and the mind, the soul, if you want to speak about the soul. Of course, you can't really speak about the soul anymore. We look at Tolstoy, I love Tolstoy, they sit around for hours talking about the state of their souls, drinking

their tea and jam. They are all so depressed but they are talking about the state of their souls. When was the last time you had a conversation about the state of your soul? And it's just, yeah. All of that, all of that world. I think it is alive, certainly alive in the Greek plays and hopefully I captured or brought something of that with me.

K: In *By the Bog of Cats* Hester is a member of the Traveller community, and Medea is a barbarian princess who has no citizenship in Athens.² They are women in whom rage erupts because women are somehow considered secondary on a social scale. We have been working for several years on the destituent power which is embodied in figures that are or embody the name of something: they incarnate not just a single individual but a force for something else. We see Medea as a force, as a destituent figure, a chance for bringing up some revolutionary action against the establishment. There is what we have called a “laceration of care” as far as maternity is concerned, the figure of the mother as someone caring for and protecting people is subverted in Medea. In Hester there is this strength but all the female characters in the play show some problematic features. Do you think there is this power for breaking up, destroying and starting again by using other methods of thinking about society in Medea? And is this true also for Hester, in how she questions neoliberalism? In the play there are these two families representing two communities that clash with the Cassidy's representing a neoliberal attitude against the forces of nature, the bog.

M. C.: I am thinking more about the Greek plays, I am thinking also about Hester and *By the Bog of Cats* as well, but just in a broader context. I think that unfortunately that revolution is negative and is reactionary. It is not positive and imaginative. It does not come out of a place of freedom, it comes out of a place of negativity, it comes out of a place of reaction because the wall is up against you and smashing down this wall is not creating anything, It is reacting and is destructive. Because the value placed on your life is considered lesser; it brings with it a sense of inferiority, a sense of anger, a sense of a wish for revenge. These are not positive feelings and maybe a revolution, maybe you have to feel inferior, maybe you have to feel angry and maybe you may want to have revenge. I always bring it down to the individuals.

² Travellers are an indigenous minority who, historical sources confirm, have been part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers long shared history, cultural values, language, customs and traditions make them a self-defined group, and one which is recognizable and distinct. Their culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an important factor, distinguishes them from the sedentary (settled) population. There are an estimated 25,000 Travellers in Ireland, making up more than 4,485 Traveller families. This constitutes approximately 0.5% of the total national population. It is estimated that an additional 15,000 Irish Travellers live in Britain, with a further 10,000 Travellers of Irish descent living in the USA (<https://itmtrav.ie/what-is-itm/irish-travellers/>).

But it is as if they have been forced down too much and too long, so the reaction is explosive and it is out of control and it is too much so they do not follow the rules of the rest of us because they are pressured groups. And there is a sense of feelings hard done by, the sense of injustice, the sense of being wronged is so great. And yes, it does touch on the whole idea of the bigger picture, the journey of the soul, the journey of the species and talking out those details. What makes drama urgent for me is that it is about the individual, it is about the details of their particular circumstances. And whatever that signifies in the larger world or in the political sphere, so be it, but that interests me less than the individual journey. The journey of the individual. So, I don't see these women as positive examples, unfortunately, I probably see them as necessary, I see them as driven, I am thinking of Phaedra, I am thinking of Jocasta, I am thinking of Antigone, I am thinking of Clytemnestra, I am thinking of Medea, I am thinking of Electra. To me these women are trapped. And because they have to seize the power, it makes them dangerous, it does not allow for the medium, they are trying and trying and they snap. They never reach a point where there is a positive resolution, it is always tragic. Maybe that is the faith of woman until the scales rebalance.

K: What kind of effect do you want to achieve in the relationship between Hester and the audience. Do you think of catharsis by the way of terror or pity? What kind of reaction can the audience have in front of Hester and her negative behaviour?

M. C.: I have always had difficulty understanding catharsis and if you look into it there actually is a lot of confusion about what it actually means. Terror and pity, yes. Transformation, I am not so sure about it. A distillation of feeling. I remember a friend of mine going to see *By the Bog of Cats* and she said "I just had to go home and check my children". And I was "that is the reaction". Yeah, I mean it is a tough one. There is so much laid down on how a woman should be and what a woman is. And I think that most women, any thinking woman while you are subjected to it, would find it incredibly limiting: what is expected of us, what is written in constitutions and laws about what women are and what women can and can't do. And when you think about it, we have the for less than 100 years. And just the policing around women is incessant and it seems it has always been since things were written down. The deciders, the lawmakers, around what a woman is tend to be rooms full of men and not a woman in sight. While her faith, her destiny and her life is decided. And I suppose one of the areas that there is most mythology around is, Woman as Madonna. The great bearer of offspring, the adoring mother, the sacrificing mother. That your life should be over once you give birth to a child. That you become that child's slave to all its needs and purposes. And I don't think that many of us have many problems with that because of natural affection and all of that comes into it. You do, you understand that contract. You understand that relation

and the power of that. But it is all the other stuff around how we define women. Armies have been slaughtering since time began and the idea of a woman taking up arms or a woman being violent is anathema, is an anthem because we were so schooled in our identity, the identity that has been put upon us. It is the same also for men, I mean they have been schooled in that identity, what a man is, what a man should be, how a man should measure up.

So, we are all kind of trapped in this kind of binary, controlling way of being. And anybody who steps out of that, is shocking to ourselves and shocking for others. In terms of reaction to Hester, Hester killing her little daughter is shocking and is terrifying but you open the newspaper and every day you see a version of Medea and not surprisingly most of the cases that get covered are of women who harm their children but, actually, there are more men out there harming their children statistically. But there is something around the idea of the mother and child that is incredibly beautiful and powerful and it does not really allow for much other discourse. And I do not know where I am on that. Except to say that what she does is appalling and, yet, I have sympathy for her. That's not to say I condone it or excuse it but if you look at the circumstances where she has come from, you look at the cycle of trauma, in a way it is kind of inevitable. Her life and her idea of herself has been so battered and diminished and I think it is in Medea as well, it is the idea of the killing of the sons, they are going to die anyway, they are going to be taken out anyway. It was better they died by her hand than by Creon's. I was trying to take that into Hester and the reason she kills her daughter, she is going to be left with these terrible people and carrying this trauma of the mother, rightly or wrongly and I am not sure I agree with her thinking, but I think Hester agrees, she believes she is doing the right thing.

K: A way of freeing little Josie by killing her. Freeing her from a sort of condition of slavery because Medea as Hester is a barbarian, a migrant, she lives in poor conditions. Medea is an excessive figure not only in words but also in performance, she arrives with a chariot, she is an excessive spectacular character. Did you want to achieve a similar spectacular effect, or did you just want to be realistic? Is there an extreme theatrical aesthetics when relating to the intertext of Medea?

M. C.: With the Ghost fancier and the kind of the dance of death, that was my version of that, and I suppose not as spectacular as the chariot. I wish I could have the chariot but it would have been, you know, that's Euripides. He wrote that but, again, it is that idea destiny versus free will which the Greeks are full of. As well as how can you, how much can you shape your destiny or is it written long before you were born or are you just acting out what the gods have decided for you as in Oedipus? So, less about spectacle. I guess what I was trying to use was a component from another world or the other world,

which is what the chariot is. I suppose that was the Irish equivalent or the contemporary equivalent that is somehow understandable to us now and maybe just as acceptable. Well, depending on your beliefs but even if you are a complete rationalist and you don't believe in any of that kind of thing, it still works theatrically I think as a theatrical device. The Ghost Fancier there at the beginning and coming at the end. I think the wedding scene is spectacle, the wedding scene on the bog. I do not know if you have seen that, the pictures of a wonderful designer, she designed the wedding design. She died a few years ago but she did the set, the scenography for *By the Bog of Cats* and she set this big long white table literally in the middle of the bog. It just looked incredible. I think the more that is taken away from the representational and realism and naturalism, the more effect it has and, yet, it has to be profoundly real, the relationship between Hester and the daughter and Carthage and all the characters must be incredibly real. But that's what is wonderful about theatre you can have incredibly real things in surreal landscapes or in mythical landscapes. So, yeah, the chariot is wonderful. Someday, someday I'll have a chariot.



Fig. 2 Olwen Fouéré as Hester and Pat Kinevane as The Ghost Fancier (Abbey Theatre, Dublin 1998)



Fig. 3 David Shannon (Ghost Fancier) and Susan Lynch (Hester) in the 2015 production of *By The Bog of Cats* directed by Selina Cartmell (Abbey Theatre, Dublin)

K: Have you seen a development through the years in the way you perceive this play and how other people do through the different mise-en-scène and the perception of the audience? How has *The Bog of Cats* changed through the years diachronically in the leading performances which have developed, has that relationship changed diachronically in the different staging of the play?

M. C.: It is done quite a lot, you know. And some people think it is the only play I've written which is really annoying. I kind of hate it at the minute.

K: Ok, so let's talk about some other plays such as *The Mai* (1995)

M. C.: Nooooo even worse! I have seen some of the productions. There are big spectacular productions and then there are very small theatres who do it. They have done it professionally; they have done it amateur. It is translated into many languages and done in different countries. I don't generally see them. I think because the hard wiring is Medea, is that myth. That story is so powerful that it speaks across the ages and I think that's why it is still done. I don't think it is any thanks to me, I think it is because that blueprint is this very powerful arc and the arc is the Medea arc and I've just happened to put it in this context.

K: But it is also an extremely Irish play. The bog in itself is the place for changing and for breaking up the things but also the language used, Irish English and the Midlands accent. It is true that one of the play's strengths is Medea but at the same time *By the Bog of Cats* is connected and related to the Irish scenario as for example the Traveller community and other situations that are not that frequent in other type of contexts. In a way they reinforce that picture of Medea which many of us sometimes forget, that

she was an outsider and she was refusing to integrate when Jason wants to be part of mainstream characters and life. Have you used the language to singling out the characters? Is there a trait of resistance also in the way the characters use language and Irish English in particular?

M. C.: The language is from where I grew up. Those were the sounds I would have first heard. It is a very rural area, and a very, very inventive way of using the language. Irish people speak Hiberno-English, we do not speak standard English, we do not speak the queen's English and we are very proud of the fact. Because, as you probably know from your research, our own language was largely taken from us with the Penal laws. People were not allowed to speak Irish and children were punished when they spoke Irish in schools and they had this tally stick for children and they put a notch on the stick if you spoke Irish and when you had enough notches you got beaten etcetera. So, we have an awful relationship with English, with the English language and a very beautiful one. The way we speak English is always with the ancestors' memory and trauma of our own language underneath it. If we can mangle the Queen's English or the King's English, we are very happy to do that. That has been our revenge as a little island and that has been our pride and our dignity. The Midland dialect where I grew up was one of the first places to be colonized. "Kings county" and "Queens County" and it was considered outside the Pale, it was considered wild territory. You had a couple of counties around Dublin, that was "The Pale" and that was within English Law and then you had "outside the Pale" which was the Midlands and beyond. Then later on, that got all sorted out but it was all pretty much under control but for a couple of centuries there, it was wild country. And you have to remember as well that before the English came, we had the Normans so that added to the language and the accents and before that, we had the Vikings. I mean, 10th century Dublin was one of the biggest slave markets in Europe where they had the big markets and slaves were brought from far and wide and sold off.

So, there are so many layers on this island that have contributed to what is the "Irish identity". With the founding of the State after 1916, after the war of independence, there was such a huge reduction in the imagination of the people by that constitution, by De Valera's Ireland, by a very narrow-minded church and state. I think there was something similar in Italy with the church and the state and the law so that you probably know how that kills imagination. But, also, how it incites rebellion and anger in the hearts of the people. And that feeling of being strangled all the time and that feeling will come down. We are not old as a nation, we will be 100 years independent in 2022, we are a very young republic. We talk about the 800 years of British rule like a cliché, we talk about it like "that's the 800 years" you know the obsession of it. And it is like a shorthand we have but there is such loss and such trauma in it as well

because if you look back at it, you look back at the language, you look back at the culture, you look back at the poetry which was lost. You look back at the Brehon Law system which was an incredibly fair system, much more equitable than anything coming out from Greece or Rome or England. For the Brehon Laws a woman had property rights, she could divorce her husband, she could own her children. You had all these things that have only recently been granted to women in some countries and in other countries not at all. A woman could inherit, there was a great freedom and fairness and a woman could rule as well. So, there was an awful lot that was lost. Our trade was with the Mediterranean, we were great wine importers. All those chieftains were lying down under their bear skins in front of the fire with their burgundy. This idea and how we were left when we finally managed to get our freedom and independence back and how the world saw us. We were so reduced, from this kind of autonomous place which had its own language, its own laws, its own ideas of culture and have all of that taken away. And that is still in our gene pool, that is there and it is still in the relationship the English have with us and we with them.



Fig. 4 The wedding scene in the 1998 Abbey Production of *By the Bog of Cats*



Fig. 5 The wedding scene in Ansley Valentine's production of *By the Bog of Cats* (Indiana University Theatre, 2019)

K: In a way it was the first act of violence of the Empire. Ireland was a sort of lab where the English experimented with strategies of possession and dispossession that were then applied to other countries. Similar policies were used in India for example. It was extremely violent and sad what happened.

M. C.: Absolutely, savage. All of that is there, and all of that impacts on who we are and who we want to be and brings it back to the language, to the Midlands and the place and the details and the idea of the outsider and the idea of the one who is not respected and the idea of the one who can be reduced and trashed. So, Hester is carrying all of that. And when she reacts, the reaction is volcanic because the suppression has been volcanic and violent and consistent.

I have a new play opening in London next week so I'm heading over on Wednesday. I have great friends in the business, in theatre in London. It is not them I'm speaking about but every time I have a new play opening in London a small part of me feels I am going into enemy territory, partly for the historical reasons I have just told you. Because with the best intentions, that is how the English establishment sees

Ireland and the Irish. It is in their DNA as it is in ours. We were the oppressed and then we fought back and they have never forgiven that. We were their imagination and their conscience, when they were destroying half the world, we held the language for them.

K: So, what do you make of these last results in Northern Ireland with Sinn Fein being top party. Would you say this in Ireland will bring a sort of re-union? Because this year there has been such a huge debate about partition and British people sometimes are even scared to mention partition.

M. C.: I don't know, I am not very good at politics. It will probably come down to money like everything.

K: What is this play opening in London about?

M. C.: It is called *Girl on an Altar*. It is about the sacrifice of Iphigenia, you know Agamemnon and the first part of the Oresteia. He comes home from the war, he comes in and Clytemnestra puts him on the red carpet and within five minutes she has him killed in his silver bath with her Lydian axe. So, I am pausing that moment. He comes home and what happens? I am extending that moment between his arrival home and his death. So, it does not happen immediately I am just examining that. It is about a marriage, a big marriage and in many ways a successful one. It is about the sacrifice of a child and how can you live after atrocity and is it ever possible to forgive and reconcile after an act of such savagery?

K: Women in your plays are so powerful and stubborn, take for instance Portia Coughlan. In Ireland there has been that tradition starting from Eamon De Valera of relegating women in the home while all the women in your plays they are disruptive, they distance themselves from that idea of care. That works very well both theatrically but also in reappropriating women's identity.

M. C.: Nobody ever gives you anything. Nobody ever gives you power. Power always has to be taken. That is true for everyone and there is a culture of older men nurturing and bringing on younger men into positions of seniority. There hasn't been to date a culture of older women nurturing and bringing on younger women to positions of seniority. And I think that is beginning to be addressed, and it really needs to be addressed. We look after the generation coming up underneath us. We look after the young men and we look after the young women equally and try to educate them and give them the confidence and the skills and the education so that they can take on these positions of power and know how to use

this power they have in a positive way rather than being reactionary, negative and extreme. This is what happens when you are denied power for too long.