

“Ya beautiful, beautiful child, I could ate ya”: The Brutality of Matriarchal Revolution in *Juno and the Paycock*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, and *By the Bog of Cats*

From the early days of the Irish dramatic canon and Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Hibernia, the personification of nationalist Irish identity, is often reflected in the major female characters of Ireland’s stage. As such, the mother-daughter relationship would be a particular site of anxiety around the future of the nation. How are the notions of what Brian Singleton calls “patriarchal essentialism” (Singleton 186) in regard to Irishness being preserved or challenged in each generation, and how willing or able is the older woman to transmit and nurture them in the younger? How do the anxieties surrounding this ideological torch-passing manifest in increasingly violent confrontations between the women, and what do these brutal encounters reveal about the plays’ outlook on Irish identity?

In tracing the mother-daughter bond from the supportive and hopeful pair in *Juno and the Paycock* to the savagery of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and finally the gruesome, fatalistic relationship at the heart of *By the Bog of Cats*, an increasing ambivalence surrounding the state of the nation and the worth of its firmly held identity politics emerges. The mother-daughter relationship is intrinsically concerned with lineage, and the degradation of that relationship in a tradition so invested in the feminine as national symbol is an expression of fear over the sustainability of Ireland’s identity.

Sean O’Casey’s 1924 play *Juno and the Paycock* provides a seminal example of the mother-daughter bond in Irish drama and imbues this only surviving familial bond with the weight of longevity. The family indulges in the high life on credit, until everything goes wrong nearly simultaneously; their creditors come calling, the son is executed by a rival political faction, and Mary, a young woman with “two forces working in her mind” (O’Casey 198), those of the past and the future, becomes pregnant by her British boyfriend, who abandons her to her new circumstances. Hope is permitted, however, as she and her mother Juno reject the damaging patriarchy to form a sort of matriarchal collective, leaving Dublin for Juno’s sister’s home where the child will not have a father, but “will have what’s far better...two mothers.” (O’Casey 244)

Thanks to its firmly canonical status, there is a wealth of writing on *Juno and the Paycock*. Where a reading of this play is helpful here is as a control from which the later, more brutal mother-daughter bonds differentiate. Juno and Mary’s relationship itself is loving, if perfunctory; affection is not easily meted out because practicality, not sentimentality, is paramount here, but the love is never in doubt. A major product of staging this female pair is the comparison between them and the father-son pair sharing their flat. The men here are loved but damaging forces; the patriarch drives the family into debt and privileges drink and jocularly over work, while the son brings societal violence into the home when he informs on a republican neighbor. The women, conversely, work and protest peacefully, and while their lot is certainly a sad one as they leave the home, they are clear-eyed enough to see and embrace their future. The shamed daughter and stalwart mother’s movement toward a strongly matriarchal reordering of the family structure implies both an outright rejection of the patriarchy and of the deep conservatism inherent in such a system. Where the men both rail against Mary and insist with implied violence that “she should be dhruiven out o’ the house she’s brought disgrace on” (O’Casey 238) for her premarital sexual activities, Juno sides with her daughter and against the embodied politics of the men, actively shielding her from their brutality. The new matriarchal unit

they create in leaving the men and the apartment is one based around the product of an act deemed immoral by the patriarchally essentialized social norms, and in so doing they are embodying the possibility that Ireland can progress beyond that intensely Catholic and conservative construction to something more egalitarian, productive, and compassionate.

The millennial plays, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *By the Bog of Cats*, stand in stark contrast where the mother-daughter relationship is concerned. In a dramatic canon as confined as Ireland's, it would be impossible to ignore the echoes of *Juno and the Paycock* in later works. The positive and protective female bond of this early staple of the Irish theater is never far from mind when a mother-daughter pair arrives on the Irish stage, and, in the case of the brutality performed in these two later plays, Juno and Mary's reverberations function as ghostly reminders of what might have been had their matriarchal revolution spread beyond their family.

Martin McDonagh's 1996 work *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is almost entirely invested in the mother-daughter bond, and stages its final few days before ending in savagery. Mag Folan and her middle-aged daughter Maureen live together in Connemara, County Galway, constantly and insistently perpetrating cruelties small and large against one another. When Mag's conservative and surreptitious meddling costs virgin Maureen the love of a man she has pined after, the daughter tortures her mother with hot oil onstage before bludgeoning her to death with a fire poker offstage. The play ends not with the separation Maureen so desired, but with her mother's identity subsuming her own in its absence. This bond is once again inverted in Marina Carr's 1998 play *By the Bog of Cats*, a reimagining of the Medea story but centering on a Traveler woman and her daughter in the Irish countryside. Hester Swane, abandoned by her mother as a child and by Carthage, the father of her own child, spends much of the play fighting to bring her former lover back to their home and to escape the guilt and loneliness of her motherless and murderous life. Her daughter Josie is her major outlet and supply of affection, and the culminating act of infanticide is not born from a desire for revenge or to assert power, but as a gruesome proof of her maternal love and a last terrible act of protection.

In examining these two plays and their climactic brutality, Julia Kristeva's theory on the abject is a useful lens. This theory addresses those characteristics of a person or society that are "radically excluded" (Kristeva 2) from the subject's constructed identity, which can be read as the repulsive byproducts of essentialism. In her book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that abjection is "what disturbs identity, systems, order." (Kristeva 4) She writes specifically on violence and gore, noting that "refuses and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live." (Kristeva 3) The border between life and death is located within the corpse or the bloody wound; in irrefutably proving the existence of that which is "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva 1), these repulsive sights move us closer to that uncrossable boundary, the part of life we radically exclude in order to escape its "weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant." (Kristeva 2) The abject is not subject, as it is excluded specifically so that the subject can come into being. Nor is it object; because it is intrinsically linked to the subject and lurking within it, the abject can never be fully other. It is in a way the photo negative of strategic essentialism: that which is sloughed off and hidden away so that an identity can be solidified. In these two plays, the essentialism staged in *Juno* as a paragon of Irish motherhood, and thereby Irishness, is violently inverted, and both characters and audience are forced to confront the abject components of that identity-

making on individual and societal levels.

In McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the effect of staging the mother-daughter pairing differs significantly from O'Casey in that there is not a correlative father-son pairing to compare with the women. In fact, the patriarchal absence is notable in its totality; Mag's husband, Maureen's father, is not only invisible, he is unnamed and unmentioned. This singularity of parental relationship highlights the claustrophobia of the pairing; they only have each other to respond and react to, and cannot, therefore, essentialize themselves into a feminine collective the way Juno and her clan do. The only familial Other is the other half of the pairing, immediately positioning the women as adversaries, both psychologically and dramaturgically. Because they were once one body, however, Mag can never be just an object to Maureen; what disgusts her about her mother is the abject in herself, that which she has rejected in order to form a separate identity from the woman who bore her. What results is an extremely tense, antipathetic relationship fraught with emotional violence from both women and physical violence from Maureen when she perceives no other option in the face of her mother's deceit. Crucial, however, are the brief moments of something resembling camaraderie; Mag compliments Maureen's cooking "a nice bit of cod in butter sauce" (McDonagh 43), and Maureen buy her mother "a pack of wine gums" (McDonagh 43) for no particular reason. Later in this scene, their regular pattern of invective softens, as Maureen "laughing" and "smiling" (McDonagh 45) calls her mother the names she invokes earlier with malice and contempt. I point to these small moments of community for two reasons. The first is to highlight the underlying potential for a bond; these women are capable of feeling something other than hate toward one another, even if only for a brief moment. To this point, no matter the evils they have done one another, the maternal link is intact enough to allow for occasional kindness.

The second reason these moments are essential in exploring the mother-daughter relationship at play, though, is their correlation to the coming violence in the culmination of the pairing. These moments between Mag and Maureen call to Juno and Mary before turning away entirely from their cautious hope. There are echoes here in Mag and Maureen's simple praise and small acts of kindness of Juno and Mary's implicit rather than explicit bond, and the gentler teasing recalls the earlier pair's more comfortable relationship. Where that affection allowed Juno and Mary to galvanize themselves as a matriarchal unit and break out from the patriarchal cycle of loss and despair in which they were ensnared, though, here it serves as the catalyst for an extreme display of violence and a dramatic darkening of the central conflict from something acidic and corrosive to utterly explosive. It is as if that maternal bond is itself dangerous, and veiling it behind layers of petty hurts and aggression keeps its potential harm at bay. The flashes of affection, stripped of the pair's usual malice, allows the savagery to burst forth as well, perhaps both because they engender a sense of ease that allows Mag to show her hand in regard to her deceit over Maureen's love-life and because the emotional whiplash involved in briefly touching a precious thing only to be reminded of the damage it can and has done demands immediate and forceful reckoning from the hurt party.

There is a strong current of the sacrificial violence Kristeva and Reineke argue accompanies abjection as a means of either overcoming or purifying it in Maureen's torture of Mag. According to Martha Reineke's reading of Kristeva in her book *Sacrificed Lives*, "at the very boundaries of life and death, humans invoke the most ancient of gestures: they cut, kill, and eat bodies to create community...For, if they can capture and master the

powers of chaos without capitulating to them...the world belongs to them.” (Reineke 11) Maureen’s calculated, almost ritualistic torture of her mother, which she performs “slowly and deliberately” (McDonagh 47) demonstrates this; staring at her mother “in dumb shock and hate” (McDonagh 46), Maureen is abjecting the matriarch in its most extreme depths, and with the following torture she attempts to solidify a mastery over the boundary between herself and the abjected woman. In the matricide that follows, though, Maureen does not triumph; the mother is dead, the maternal bond that held such promise in *Juno and the Paycock* is disbanded, and the destructive cycle Juno and Mary escaped is perpetuated in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, as Maureen takes her mother’s place in the rocking chair, alone.

If *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* can be read as a brutal and harsh rejection of the hope present in Juno’s matriarchal movements, *By the Bog of Cats* provides a mother-daughter relationship situated in a much more resolutely gray space than McDonagh’s women. In her book *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* Melissa Sihra asserts that Marina Carr writes women who “contrast radically with passive and idealized images of femininity which present women variously as symbols of nation, the maternal and the domestic.” (Sihra 210) Juno performs as precisely those symbols, but Carr’s Hester Swane troubles each one significantly. In so doing, she is abjected; where Mag Folan is abjected by her daughter, however, Hester is abjected by her society at large.

Unlike the previous plays, the staging of the mother-daughter pair seems most immediately significant not in its comparative difference or existence in the face of a patriarchal example, but in its departure from its source. In *Medea*, both the myth and Euripides’ play on which *By the Bog of Cats* is based, the rejected lover and mother bears her partner two sons, who she then murders for reasons including revenge, politics, and the seizing of power where she has none. By specifically changing this relationship from a mother and sons to a mother and daughter, Carr is immediately pointing to her play’s concern over the matriarchal line and the lasting effects of its being broken.

Hester and her daughter Josie are closely bonded; unlike either of the previous maternal pairings, there are staged examples of their mutual, fierce affection for each other. For example, toward the end of the play, the pair “swirl and twirl to the music” (Carr 388) before a mutual declaration of an almost primal love, each stating they “could ate” (Carr 288) the other.

Like *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, however, this moment of true affection is a precursor for the most gruesome violence staged in an already bloody play. Thanks to her daughter’s desperate pleas to accompany her mother to Hester’s destination, unaware that it is death, Hester adapts her planned suicide and kills her daughter first, cutting “Josie’s throat in one savage movement” (Carr 395) before killing herself. Josie’s fierce devotion to Hester, and her assurance that should her mother leave, the daughter would “be watchin’ for [her] all the time ‘long the Bog of Cats” (Carr 394), recalls Hester’s devastation at her own mother’s abandonment, and this convinces her to do the brutal deed. Once again, love begets destruction.

This is also, though, a gruesome mirror of the culmination of Juno and Mary. While their exit from the damaging patriarchal constructions of their family and society is in a sense a triumphant demonstration of an essentialized embrace of noble and maternal Irishness, Hester and Josie exit in pain and blood, abjected by their inescapable status as Travelers and therefore outsiders at the boundary of Irishness. There is an element of

Juno's maternal steadfastness here, as Hester makes the difficult choice for her daughter that they would be better leaving their current situation behind them; Hester, like Juno, urges the pair onward out of love and a protective impulse to shield the daughter from pain. This is troubled here, however, by the brutality of the moment. Hester could keep her maternal unit together by not dying, instead taking Josie anywhere else to live. The essentialized patriarchal system that inhibits her, however, is simply too big. Death is the only answer she sees as a means of repudiating the patriarchy and purging her own abject state, but rather than the political motives that drove Medea, here they are the contributing factors that support for Hester a decision made from a primal need to keep her daughter from the pain of being abjected from both society and the matriarchal coupling.

Here too is an example of Kristeva's sacrificial violence, extrapolated out into societal rather than strictly personal chaos management. Because Hester and her daughter can never be subjects where the patriarchally essentialized Irish society is concerned, they must confront their own abjection and existence outside the boundaries of the palatable. According to Kristeva and Reineke, "when persons perceive that not only their formally adjudicated positions in society, but also their very capacity to be in the world are at risk, they draw no longer on familiar strategies for claiming space...[they] substitute common instruments for lethal weapons: the very powers of life and death." (Reineke 11) In sacrificing her daughter and herself, Hester claims space for the abject in the hermetically sealed Irish society by absenting herself from it, for as she warns Carthage "Ya won't forget me now...That'll be me and Josie ghostin' ya." (Carr 396)

This space-claiming through violent removal is at the heart of the plays' anxieties surrounding Irish identity politics. Juno and Mary carve out their place by rejecting the violence, emotional and physical, in which the patriarchal society surrounding them traffics. Seventy years after that peaceful revolution, however, Hibernia's status has grown perhaps more tenuous, and certainly more sinister in the intervening time. By the end of the twentieth century, the plays seem to claim that the very space Juno and Mary create for themselves and inhabit is suffocating and untenable, as Maureen and Mag seal themselves behind several layers of rancor and fear and Hester and Josie find themselves pushed further to the brink of society. Violence is the only escape these women have access to, and the implication is that Hibernia, and by extension the ideal of Irishness, has found herself in a situation where her sole options are kill or be killed.

Whether Hibernia chooses to be the destroyer or the destroyed, Hester's pronouncement that her and her daughter's ghosts will have more power than their corporeal forms do speaks directly to the underlying loss at the heart of these plays and their implications about Irish identity. Whether Hibernia is murdered or the murderer, a core element of her essentialized identity is missing: her power to draw people together for a common cause. This version of Hibernia, then, has shed her most important purpose to Ireland: to unite the country under the flag of Irishness. The vacuum left by the absence of Hibernia as a uniting figure in these plays is felt more deeply than her presence would be, trained as we are to look for her visage in every woman on the Irish stage. The results of that searching only produce cynical, violent, or desperate women, highlighting the unsustainable position in which essentialism has placed Hibernia. In order to essentialize and maintain a purely "Irish" identity, she must continue to abject portions of herself, and the more she abjects the less she fully is, until her only recourse is the delivering or the receiving of a violent death.

This fundamental inability on Hibernia's part to sustain herself peacefully is especially troublesome when dealing with the question of lineage. Unlike the explicitly fertile and procreating Mary of *Juno and the Paycock*, the other two plays provide pairings on either side of the procreative window; Maureen is a middle-aged virgin living with her elderly mother, and Josie is a pre-pubescent child, certainly incapable of producing children of her own at the time of her death. The violence inherent in each of their storylines serves not only to end the lives of the characters, but implies a wider reaching death: that of the future Hibernias to come from these women. There can be no matriarchal revolution without foot soldiers in the fray, and by brutally cutting off the production of those potential feminine rebels, the plays take on an almost apocalyptic view on the future of Irish identity. The exclusive and essentialized Hibernia of these plays is like a snake eating her own tail; by continuing to abject elements of herself and to repress those pieces ever further until the pressure is unsustainable, she not only ensures her own destruction, but ends her line as well. If Hibernia can have no legacy in the next generation, how much influence can she rightly expect to hold in her own? In this light, Hibernia is either past her prime or doomed to never reach it, and in either case these plays express a belief that the domesticized, romanticized representation of national identity will be unavailable for the coming generation. If Irish identity is to survive, it must shed its dead skin so that it can grow and expand, rather than shriveling into an increasingly essentialized notion of itself while its abjections riot ever more dangerously at its periphery.

This anxiety around the survival and sustainability of the Irish identity is not strictly a theoretical argument for these plays, however; there is a strong strain of confrontation within them. Unlike both *Juno and the Paycock*, where the patriarchally produced violence is kept off the stage, and *Medea*, in which the infanticide is out of the audience's sight, *By the Bog of Cats* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* stage their savagery in full view of the spectator. The audience must confront the violence in these pieces in a way they have not been made to throughout the Irish stage tradition, and in doing so they themselves are made to approach abjection along with the characters. Though the violence onstage is of course unreal, the attention paid to Mag's "screams in pain and terror...crying and whimpering" (McDonagh 47) and to Hester killing her daughter "in one savage movement" (Carr 395), resulting in the mother "wailing...demented" (Carr 395) at the sight of her deed, betrays a desire on the playwrights' parts to involve the audience as viscerally as possible in the violence. In so doing, the plays force their audience to engage directly with the horror of these women's situations, and make impossible, for at least those few moments, their further abjection by the spectator. In forcing a boundary transgression in these moments, the plays are calling for wider attention to the brutally damaging effects of essentialism; they are despairing and excruciating, and night after night an audience full of potential propagators of those dangerous identity politics are made to step into the void with their abjected victims. The plays force a visceral comprehension of the issues they explore dramaturgically, and in so doing are calling for change both textually and metaphysically.

These two plays with strikingly similar anxieties around the matriarchal line capture a small window of time at the end of a century where the predominant argument centers on the viability and worth of the Hibernia model, ultimately arguing that she is abjected, dangerous, and unsustainable. After *By the Bog of Cats*, the trajectory of Irish drama shifts away from this central relationship and returns to the patriarchy. According

to Brian Singleton, emerging female writers after these plays moved toward staging outright rejections of the patriarchy rather than continuing to explore and indict the thorny mother-daughter relationship. A wave of plays at the turn of the new century “work towards the de-essentialization of gender, and the new Irish woman in particular...her race and ethnicity are uncoupled from nation and contest the closure inherent in the hegemonic concept of ‘Irishness’.” (Singleton 186-187) As the Irish dramatic canon has been apt to do since its inception, the plays are once again talking to each other here. The doom-laden conclusions wrought by the mother-daughter violence of the 90’s give way to female characters repudiating the patriarchy, but unlike Juno and Mary, they do so without situating themselves within the codified boundaries of Irish womanhood set out by that patriarchy. The larger trajectory of Irish dramatic literature, then, moves toward solving its own matriarchal puzzle. The conception of Irishness must shift away from a maternally guarded and bequeathed structure of behaviors and genetics and toward a self-defined, inclusive, and hard-won individual identity. Absent the strict essentialism located in the Hibernia figure, the abjected “foreigner” can now situate herself within an Irishness that makes room for her, and the boundaries between the acceptable and repulsive become permeable in a way that keeps the necessity for savagery at bay. Hibernia is dead, the trajectory seems to say. Long live her daughters.

For the Irish stage to reach this place of de-essentialized, and therefore less abjected, identity politics, however, it had to pass through the violence and horror of *By the Bog of Cats* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, situated as they are in inflexible worlds populated by abjected women. These mother-daughter pairings, both inherently concerned with legacy and boundary, are shattered reflections of the larger society to which Juno and Mary gazed with hope. Despite that earlier pair’s explicit rejection of the patriarchy, they nevertheless embody the very traits of womanhood that the system codified into the ideal picture of feminine Irishness: maternal, communal, and moral. The implication as Juno takes charge of her offspring and the future progeny thereof is that Ireland is in safe and hardworking hands, and that the genealogical line of Juno and those Irish women like her will serve to right Ireland’s course. In stripping away the romanticized and domesticated essentialism at work there, however, the later plays are laying bare the abjection underneath. To keep the gently maternal, communal, and moral Junos essentialized, the possessive, xenophobic, and cruelly conservative Mags must be abjected. To hold the full-blooded Irish woman as the paragon, the Traveler Hester must be abjected. The strict boundaries that demarcate Irish society push both of these women to the shadows, but as Kristeva writes, the abject is “something rejected from which one does not part.” (Kristeva 4) The more the societies of these plays push back against their abjects, the more dangerous they become. The sacrificial violence that explodes the matrilineal pairings at the hearts of *By the Bog of Cats* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, and the confrontation with the abject that precipitate both horrors, not only ends the lives of the characters, but implies a greater death for Irish identity politics. Maureen lives, but is a middle aged virgin, unlikely to have children, especially as the abject of her mother becomes the subject of herself. In her infanticide and suicide, Hester is explicitly ending her own matriarchal line and the possibility of further outsider propagation. Where Juno and Mary, and the essentialized Irish women they represent, solidified and propagated an Irish identity centered on love and community, Mag and Maureen and Hester and Josie are the denigrated and dangerous women left in their wake. Their Ireland, lived not in the soft glow of romanticism but in the harsh glare of abjection, is one of pain, blood, and

restriction, and this Ireland can only be navigated with savagery.

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