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PRESENTATION DE LA REVUE AKIRI

Dans un environnement marqué par la croissance, sans cesse, des productions scientifiques, la diffusion et la promotion des acquis de la recherche deviennent un impératif pour les acteurs du monde scientifique. Perçues comme un patrimoine, un héritage à léguer aux générations futures, les productions scientifiques doivent briser les barrières et les frontières afin d'être facilement accessibles à tous.

Ainsi, s'inscrivant dans la dynamique du temps et de l'espace, la revue « **AKIRI** » se présente comme un outil de promotion et de diffusion des résultats des recherches des enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs des universités et de centres de recherches de Côte d'Ivoire et d'ailleurs. Ce faisant, elle permettra aux enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs de s'ouvrir davantage sur le monde extérieur à travers la diffusion de leurs productions intellectuelles et scientifiques.

AKIRI est une revue à parution trimestrielle de l'Unité de Formation et de Recherches (UFR) : Communication, Milieu et Société (CMS) de l'Université Alassane Ouattara. Elle publie les articles dans le domaine des Sciences humaines et sociales, Lettres, Langues et Civilisations. Sans toutefois être fermée, cette revue privilégie les contributions originales et pertinentes. Les textes doivent tenir compte de l'évolution des disciplines couvertes et respecter la ligne éditoriale de la revue. Ils doivent en outre être originaux et n'avoir pas fait l'objet d'une acceptation pour publication dans une autre revue à comité de lecture.

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La revue **AKIRI** n'accepte que des articles inédits et originaux dans diverses langues notamment en allemand, en anglais, en espagnol et en Français. Le manuscrit est remis à deux instructeurs, choisis en fonction de leurs compétences dans la discipline. Le secrétariat de la rédaction communique aux auteurs les observations formulées par le comité de lecture ainsi qu'une copie du rapport, si cela est nécessaire. Dans le cas où la publication de l'article est acceptée avec révisions, l'auteur dispose alors d'un délai raisonnable pour remettre la version définitive de son texte au secrétariat de la revue

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Abjection and Desire: A Feminist Reading of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*

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Abstract

This article proposes a feminist reading of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), two dramatic texts that mobilise the abject as both formal strategy and thematic horizon. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982), and Elaine Aston's *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (2003), the article examines how both playwrights represent female desire as radically transgressive, for it moves beyond conventional, "passive" roles to become active, consuming man's force. The paper also shows how male subjectivity is destabilised through its encounter with unregulated femininity, and how the theatrical staging of abjection constitutes a feminist critique of patriarchal symbolic order. The article concludes that these plays retain acute contemporary relevance, offering theatrical frameworks through which the persistent violence of normative gender structures may be diagnosed and contested.

Keywords: Abjection, Desire, Feminist Dramaturgy, Gender, Patriarchal Order

Abjection et désir : une lecture féministe de *L'amour de Phèdre* de Sarah Kane et de *Le deuil d'Électre* d'Eugène O'Neill

Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture féministe de *Phaedra's Love* (1996) de Sarah Kane et de *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) d'Eugene O'Neill, deux textes dramatiques qui mobilisent l'abject à la fois comme stratégie formelle et comme horizon thématique. S'appuyant sur *Les pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1982) de Julia Kristeva, *This Sex which is not One* (1977) de Luce Irigaray, *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (2003) d'Elaine Aston et *Gender Trouble* (1990) de Judith Butler, l'article analyse comment les deux dramaturges représentent le désir féminin comme radicalement transgressif car il dépasse les rôles conventionnels et « passifs » pour devenir actif, renversant le pouvoir de l'homme. L'article montre également comment la subjectivité masculine est déstabilisée par sa rencontre avec une féminité non réglementée, et comment la mise en scène théâtrale de l'abjection constitue une critique féministe de l'ordre symbolique patriarcal. L'article conclut que ces pièces conservent une énorme pertinence contemporaine, proposant des cadres théâtraux permettant de mettre en lumière et de contester la violence persistante issue des structures normatives de genre.

Mots-clés : Abjection, Désir, Dramaturgie féministe, Genre, Ordre patriarcal

Introduction

The dramatic text has always occupied a liminal space between artistic representation and social reality. It functions not merely as a mirror but as an active agent in interrogating the boundaries of subjectivity, desire, and identity formation. Thus, Sarah Kane as well as Eugene O'Neill reimagine classical myths within modern frameworks of psychological and bodily extremity. In *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Kane converts Seneca's tragedy into a raw exploration of sexual transgression, emotional emptiness, and corporeal abjection. Likewise, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) translates Aeschylus' Oresteia into the American Puritan household, dramatising incestuous desire, repression, and moral decay. In these plays, the body, sexuality, and familial relations are sites where the abject erupts destabilizing meaning and illuminating the unspoken undercurrents of social life. They confront audiences with "the psychic and social consequences of taboo, transgression, and otherness" (E. Spambalg-Berend, 2014: 2).

This article interrogates Kane and O'Neill's depiction of abjection as both a formal and thematic strategy to expose the violent foundations of patriarchal order and the gendered mechanisms through which desire is regulated, repressed, or pathologized. To reach this purpose, these questions are central: How do these plays mobilize bodily disgust, sexual transgression, and familial violation to challenge normative constructions of femininity and masculinity? In what ways does the eruption of the abject destabilize the symbolic authority of patriarchal law? And how might Kristeva's psychoanalytic framework illuminate the intersection between bodily materiality and gendered subjectivity within these dramatic texts ?

In *Phaedra's Love*, Hyppolytus, the royal prince and central figure is shown throughout the play as a cynic sexmaniac, discarding partners just as the socks he uses to masturbate in. In a conversation with his stepmother Phaedra who is passionately in love with him, Hyppolytus's self-loathing and cynicism show bodily revulsion and abjection, "I am fat. I'm disgusting. I am miserable" (S. Kane, 1996, IV: 78). Through these words, he voices his radical alienation and bodily abjection. His disdain finds further voice in the way he qualifies the life in which he was born, "I was born into this shit, you married it" (S. Kane, 1996, IV: 77).

In scene III, Phaedra in turn, expresses her disruptive and all-consuming desire for Hyppolytus in this raw confession to her daughter Strophe: 'Can't switch this off. Can't crush it. Can't. Wake up with it, burning me. Think I'll crack open I want him so much. I talk to

him. He talks to me, we know each other very well, he tells me things, we're very close. About sex and how much it depresses him, and I know (S. Kane, 1996, III: 71).

This confession, powerfully illustrates the obsessive and overwhelming nature of desire. It exposes the vulnerability of the characters and also reveals the dysfunctional dynamics inherent in their emotional and sexual relationships. Phaedra's violent desire challenges essentialists notions of female sexual subjectivity as illustrated by Elaine Aston in *Feminist Views on the English Stage : Women Playwrights 1990-2000*. She argues that "Kane's work dismantles the virgin/whore dichotomy that has historically structured representations of femininity on stage, positioning her female protagonists within a space of radical sexual agency that neither seeks male approval nor conforms to normative constructions of female eroticism" (Aston, 2003: 35).

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eugene O'Neill represents the Mannon home as a space where guilt, repression, and forbidden desire corrode both family and self. From the opening of the play, the house is marked as a site of concealed corruption; "the house with its white portico looks like a mask" (E. O'Neill, *Homecoming*, Act I: 271); suggesting the hypocrisy beneath its austere façade. In a conversation with her lover Adam Brant, Christine Mannon confesses "I hate the house and the Mannons and the life here!... its deadness!" (E. O'Neill, *Homecoming*, Act II, p 301). Here, she not only voices the suffocation of Puritan morality but also revolt against the sterile moral code of her husband Ezra, who demands obedience and purity. He even argues that "There is no life in a woman except what a man gives her" (E. O'Neill, *Homecoming*, Act III, p. 386), laying bare the violent logic of Puritan order.

There is also an incestuous attachment between Christine and her son Orin which constitutes the play's most profound exploration of abjection and psychological disintegration. Orin's pathological fixation upon his mother following Ezra's death manifests itself through a discourse that conflates possession with revulsion, "You're all I've got left, mother and love and home!" (E. O'Neill, 1931, *The Hunted*, Act II, p. 403). His subsequent anguished response to Christine's death— "You've gone from me, mother, and left me alone with the dead !" (E. O'Neill, 1931, *The Haunted*, Act I, p. 443) —recalls the madness Orestes in the *Oresteia*, yet within O'Neill's Puritan ideological framework, this condition signifies not divine retribution but rather the internal collapse precipitated by prolonged libidinal repression. Thus, The Mannons' tragedy emerges as the inexorable consequence of a cultural paradigm that proscribes corporeality, negates desire, and transmutes affective bonds into structures of culpability.

Both dramatists deploy visceral representations of bodily fluids, sexual excess, and moral transgression that exceed the limits of conventional theatrical representation. Yet these extreme depictions are not gratuitous; rather, they stage a confrontation with what Julia Kristeva theorizes as the abject—that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (J. Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). The abject, situated at the threshold between subject and object, self and other, simultaneously attracts and repels, producing a crisis in meaning that exposes the fragility of symbolic structures. In Kristeva’s formulation, abjection reveals the precariousness of identity formation, particularly as it relates to the maternal body, sexuality, and the boundaries that separate the clean from the unclean, the permissible from the forbidden.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s (1982) concept of ‘abjection’, which is a process of expelling the maternal body to establish a distinct, individual identity and Elaine Aston’s *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (2003), the article demonstrates how both playwrights represent female desire as radically transgressive, for it moves beyond conventional, “passive” roles to become active, consuming man’s force. The paper also shows how male subjectivity is destabilised through its encounter with unregulated femininity, and how the theatrical staging of abjection constitutes a feminist critique of patriarchal symbolic order.

This analysis is threefold: first, to examine how both playwrights represent the abject female subject who refuses containment within patriarchal sexual economies; second, to explore the ways in which male characters’ encounters with abjection reveal the instability of masculine identity when confronted with unregulated female desire; and third, to demonstrate how the theatrical representation of abjection functions as a feminist critique of the social and psychic violence inherent in systems that seek to purify, regulate, and discipline bodies and desires.

1. The Abject Female Subject: Transgressing Patriarchal Containment

In Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* and Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*, female protagonists embody Julia Kristeva’s notions of abjection and desire, destabilizing the patriarchal symbolic order through their transgressive sexuality and fractured maternal roles. Indeed, female desire is seen in these plays as an involuntary force that exceeds rational control and social prescription. This is observable in *Phaedra’s Love* in the conversation between Phaedra and her daughter Strophe:

Phaedra : Why ? Everyone likes him.
Strophe : I know.
Phaedra : I know what room he’s in.
Strophe : He never moves.

Phaedra : Can feel him through the walls. Sense him. Feel his heartbeat from a mile.

Strophe : Why don't you have an affair, get your mind off him.

Phaedra : There is a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be.

Strophe : No.

Phaedra : Brought together.

Strophe : He's twenty years younger than you.

Phaedra : Want to climb inside him work him out.

Strophe : This isn't healthy.

Phaedra : He's not my son.

Strophe : You're married to his father. (S. Kane, 1996, Act V: 71-72)

From this dialogue, we notice that Phaedra's passion does not seek legitimation through marriage, reproduction, or socially sanctioned forms of female eroticism. Instead, it manifests as pure intensity, disconnected from the maternal role she occupies and violently opposed to the Law of the Father that structures familial relations. Thus, her confession constitutes a radical disruption of the maternal symbolic function.

This disruptive maternal desire aligns with Kristeva's theorization of abjection as that which describes the deep unease triggered by anything that blurs the boundaries between self and others, the permitted and the forbidden. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva identifies the maternal body as the primary site of abjection, caught in a fundamental paradox: the mother is both the origin of the subject and a figure that must be psychologically expelled for that subject to achieve autonomous identity. She is, simultaneously, necessary and threatening.

Phaedra's desire for her stepson enacts precisely this collapse of boundaries. By fusing maternal care with sexual longing, two categories that patriarchal family structures work hard to separate, her transgression shows the constructed and fragile nature of those very structures. What her desire exposes is not simply a personal failing, but a structural vulnerability: kinship systems built on patriarchal logic depend on the strict separation of the nurturing mother from the desiring woman, and Phaedra's passion reveals that this separation is not natural but enforced. Her abjection is therefore not merely moral but deeply political.

Moreover, throughout the play, Phaedra's desire for her stepson Hippolytus destroys her mentally and physically as we can observe it at the end of scene IV:

Phaedra : You can't stop me loving you.

Hippolytus : Can.

Phaedra : No. You're alive.

Hippolytus : Wake up.

Phaedra : You burn me.

Hippolytus : Now you've had me, fuck someone else.

Silence.

Phaedra : Will I see you again ?

Hippolytus : You know where I am.

Silence.

Phaedra : (*Open her mouth but is momentarily lost for words. Then*)

You're a heartless bastard. (S. Kane, 1996, Act VI: 84)

This bodily and psychological deterioration stages the concept of impossibility that Luce Irigaray identifies in *This Sex which Is Not One*. Indeed, within patriarchal symbolic systems, female desire cannot find legitimate expression. She argues that phallogentric discourse has constructed a representational framework that can only apprehend female sexuality through two distorting lenses. It is represented either as lack (absence, invisibility, silence) or as excess (transgression, monstrosity, destruction); never as something autonomous, self-directed, or valid in its own rights (L. Irigaray, 1977: 23). Thus, Phaedra is condemned to occupy precisely this impossible position. Her desire is simultaneously too much and nothing at all. It is simultaneously invisible to Hippolytus (who cannot conceive of her as a sexual subject) and overwhelmingly present in her bodily and psychic disintegration. When she tells Hippolytus "I love you" (S. Kane, 1996, Act VI: 86), his response "Why?" reveals his fundamental inability to recognize her as a desiring subject rather than a maternal function.

Phaedra's abjection is further radicalized through her ultimate self-destruction. Her suicide and posthumous accusation of rape represent not victimhood but a violent refusal of redemption or reintegration into the symbolic order. As Elaine Aston observes, "Kane's female characters resist recuperation into narratives of feminine virtue or victimization" (E. Aston, 2003: 21). Phaedra's final act transforms her from abject subject into abject object, weaponizing her own body against the patriarchal structures that rendered her desire unintelligible.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine Mannon similarly embodies the abject maternal figure whose desire threatens patriarchal genealogy. Her confession to Adam Brant—"I hate the house and the Mannons and the life here!... its deadness!"—articulates a fundamental rejection of her assigned position within the Puritan symbolic order. The house, repeatedly described as tomb-like and corpse-like, functions as a spatial metaphor for the mortification of female sexuality under Puritan ideology. Christine's desire for Brant represents not simply adultery but a revolt against the necropolitical logic of Puritan domesticity, which demands the death of female eroticism in service of patriarchal reproduction.

Christine's rebellion against the Mannon household also parallels Judith Butler's theorization of gender as performative; a series of citational practices that produce the illusion of a stable, coherent identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler

argues that “gender is not an interior essence but an effect of repeated performance, regulated by normative constraints that punish deviation” (J. Butler, 1990: 23). Thus, Christine’s refusal to perform dutiful wifedom and maternal sacrifice constitutes a performative rupture. She refuses to repeat the citations that would present her as a ‘proper’ Puritan woman, and this refusal unleashes the violence of the symbolic order against her. In Act IV of *Homecoming*, she gives Ezra poison disguised as his heart medication. Realising that he has been poisoned, Ezra calls out to Lavinia before dying (E.O’Neill, 1931, *Homecoming*, Act IV: 392). This murder is not merely a private crime but a theatrical enactment of what Butler calls the “subversive repetition” of gender norms; a disruptive iteration that exposes the violence concealed within those norms (Butler, 1990: 185).

Both Phaedra and Christine thus dramatize what Kristeva conceives as the confrontation with the ‘borders’ of the subject: in transgressing the laws of kinship, desire, and femininity, they provoke the social body’s violent response. They are punished not because their desires are inherently destructive, but because those desires expose the fragility and constructedness of the symbolic order that governs them. Their abjection is, paradoxically, a testimony to their resistance.

2. Crisis of Masculine Identity: A Token of the Instability of Patriarchal Selfhood

If the female protagonists of both plays embody the abject object expelled by the patriarchal symbolic order, the male characters reveal another face of Kristeva’s theory: the crisis that abjection provokes within the masculine subject who encounters it. Abjection does not simply define the other; it destabilises the self that performs the expulsion. In both Kane’s and O’Neill’s dramatic worlds, male characters are undone by their confrontation with unregulated female desire and by the collapse of the symbolic structures that were supposed to contain it.

Hippolytus in *Phaedra’s Love* is perhaps the most radical theatrical embodiment of masculine abjection. Far from representing the heroic, resistant figure of classical tradition, Kane’s Hippolytus is a figure of spectacular self-debasement. His sexual promiscuity, presented not as mastery but as compulsive self-erasure, constitutes a parody of phallic authority. His declaration, “I am fat. I am disgusting. I am miserable” (S. Kane, 1996, Act IV: 78), does not simply express self-loathing; it stages the collapse of masculine narcissism from within. In Kristeva’s terms, Hippolytus himself occupies the position of the abject. He is the one who disturbs the symbolic order not through transgressive desire but through his radical emptiness, his refusal of meaning, affect, and social bond.

In analysing homosocial desire in *Between Men* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that patriarchal systems organize masculine identity through the traffic in women. They function as objects of exchange that cement bonds between men (E. Sedgwick, 1985: 44). Hippolytus's refusal to invest desire and his treatment of sexual partners as disposable objects constitutes an internal implosion of this system. He inhabits the structure of masculine prerogative while draining it of its reproductive, relational, and social content. What remains is pure abjection masquerading as freedom.

Moreover, Hippolytus's encounter with Phaedra's desire does not arouse him to reciprocal desire but rather intensifies his abjection. His willingness to accept her accusation of rape and to submit to execution can be read, following Kristeva, as a sacrificial logic: the subject who has become abject to himself seeks the expulsion of the abject from the social body, even at the cost of his own life. As Elaine Aston notes of Kane's dramaturgy, "the male body in Kane's theatre is as vulnerable as the female, subject to the same economies of violence and disposability" (Aston, 2003: 34). The final scene of *Phaedra's Love* in which Hippolytus is publicly eviscerated before a jeering crowd literalizes this logic: the abject body is dismembered, violated, and consumed by the social body it threatened to contaminate.

In O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, masculine identity is equally destabilized by its encounter with unregulated desire, though O'Neill's mode is more psychoanalytic than visceral. General Ezra Mannon, the patriarch whose return from war triggers the tragic sequence, represents the fullest expression of Puritan masculine authority: disciplined, repressive, and structurally dependent upon the subjugation of female sexuality. Yet his authority is immediately revealed as phantasmatic. His demand of Christine "There is no life in a woman except what a man gives her" (E. O'Neill, *Homecoming*, Act III: 386)—does not express power but the anxiety underlying it. Patriarchal identity is constituted by the denial of female desire, which means it is perpetually vulnerable to that desire's irruption.

Christine's adultery and her murder of Ezra are thus not merely personal betrayals but structural assaults on the logic of Puritan masculine identity. In Butler's terms, Christine's acts expose the performative foundations of Ezra's authority. His identity as patriarch was never a stable essence but an effect of repeated performance, dependent upon Christine's compliant repetition of her assigned role. Her refusal to repeat dissolves that identity as surely as poison dissolves the body.

Orin Mannon presents the most complex theatrical figuration of masculine abjection in O'Neill's trilogy. Unlike his father, Orin does not inhabit patriarchal authority but is

perpetually excluded from it, caught in a pre-Oedipal attachment to his mother that the Puritan symbolic order has rendered pathological. His declaration to Christine “You're all I've got left, mother and love and home!”—articulates precisely the condition Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror*: the subject who has failed to separate from the maternal body, who cannot achieve the expulsion of the abject that would shape him as an autonomous subject. (J. Kristeva, 1982: 56)

What is particularly significant in O'Neill's dramatization is the way in which Orin's abjection is gendered. His inability to achieve masculine autonomy is coded as a failure of masculine identity per se. His psychological disintegration after Christine's death—“You've gone from me, mother, and left me alone with the dead!”—enacts the horror Kristeva associates with the maternal abject: the subject who cannot expel the mother is devoured by her absence. His subsequent incestuous transference onto his sister Lavinia, and his ultimate suicide, dramatize the catastrophic consequences of a symbolic order that simultaneously demands the expulsion of the maternal and prohibits its full elaboration.

In this respect, both Kane and O'Neill reveal what Luce Irigaray identifies as the constitutive contradiction of phallogentric culture. It requires woman as its founding other, as the abject against which masculine identity is defined; while simultaneously being threatened by any manifestation of her autonomous desire or presence (L. Irigaray, 1985: 67). The male characters of both plays are not powerful agents who successfully expel the abject; they are figures undone by the return of what they were supposed to have expelled.

3. The Politics of the Body: Wretchedness as Feminist Dramaturgical Critique

The third dimension of this analysis concerns the dramaturgical and political implications of staging female wretchedness in contemporary theatre. The formal strategies through which both playwrights stage corporeal excess, transgressive desire, and bodily violation must be understood as constitutive of their feminist critique. Abjection, which is the state of being debased or wretched, the theatrical body is not, therefore, a mere vehicle for representing it. It represents the site where that wretchedness is produced, contested, and potentially transformed.

Sarah Kane's dramaturgy is particularly significant in this regard. Her radical compression of dramatic form in *Phaedra's Love*—the reduction of language to its most elemental, the elimination of psychological interiority, the foregrounding of the body's surfaces and fluids—constitutes a formal mimesis of the Kristevan abject. Kane does not represent abjection from a safe aesthetic distance; she stages it as a condition of theatrical experience. The audience is

not permitted the comfort of identification or the consolation of narrative resolution. Instead, they are confronted with bodies in extremis: the masturbating, consuming, violated body of Hippolytus; the burning, dissolving body of Phaedra; the mutilated body of Theseus at the play's conclusion.

This formal strategy is reactive to masculinity in the theatrical sphere. As Elaine Aston argues in *Feminist Views on the English Stage*, the dominant theatrical tradition has constructed the female body as spectacle—as an object of the male gaze, framed by conventions of voyeurism and possession (E. Aston, 2003: 46). Kane's theatre systematically disrupts this economy. By presenting bodies—male and female—as sites of leakage, violation, and disintegration rather than as idealized spectacles, she undermines the visual and symbolic economy through which gender hierarchies are reproduced on stage (E. Aston, 2003: 46). The abject body refuses to be looked at pleasurably. it compels a different mode of spectatorship, one grounded in discomfort, implication, and ethical demand.

This argument resonates with Laura Mulvey's foundational analysis of the male gaze in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), which, though developed in relation to film, has been productively applied to theatrical representation. Mulvey's identification of the scopophilic pleasure organized around the female body as spectacle illuminates why Kane's deliberate staging of bodily abjection constitutes a feminist counter-strategy. By rendering the body obscene rather than beautiful, abject rather than desirable, Kane disrupts the structure of voyeuristic pleasure that sustains patriarchal theatrical convention. The abject body resists being consumed as image.

O'Neill's dramaturgy operates through different formal means but achieves a comparable critical effect. The Gothic architecture of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, its long, decaying house; its masks of repression; its relentless repetition of familial violence across three generations, constitutes what we might call, according to Kristeva, an "architecture of abjection" (J. Kristeva, 1982: 53). The Mannon house is a theatrical space organized around the logic of expulsion and return: it is a structure designed to contain the abject (female sexuality, bodily desire, transgressive attachment) and it is perpetually undone by the return of what it excludes. The formal repetition of the trilogy (*Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, *The Haunted*) enacts the compulsion to show that Kristeva associates the encounter with abjection. The subject cannot integrate the abject and cannot finally expel it; it can only return, obsessively, to the site of its irruption.

Moreover, O'Neill's use of the Oresteia as mythic framework reveals the feminist dimension of his engagement with abjection. *The Oresteia*, as Irigaray argues in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), stages the founding moment of Western patriarchy: the trial of Orestes that subordinates maternal law (the Furies' demand for blood vengeance for Clytemnestra) to paternal law (Apollo's and Athena's defense of the son) (L. Irigaray, 1974: 84). O'Neill's modernization of this myth does not reproduce its patriarchal resolution; instead, he stages the catastrophic failure of that resolution. The Mannon house is precisely what remains when patriarchal law has successfully expelled the maternal—a tomb, a mortuary, a space of living death. In doing so, O'Neill's tragedy unwittingly confirms Irigaray's analysis. The founding expulsion of the maternal that constitutes Western symbolic order is not a solution but a sentence.

The politics of the body in both Kane and O'Neill's works are further illuminated by Judith Butler's theorization of what she calls 'grievable bodies' in *Precarious Life* (2004). Butler argues that "not all bodies are accorded equal recognition or mourning within dominant social orders: some bodies are rendered ungrievable, their suffering unintelligible, their deaths unmarked" (J. Butler, 2004: 72). This framework is acutely relevant to both plays. Phaedra's suicide and posthumous rape accusation render her death doubly ungrievable. She is constructed, in the eyes of the Theban court, as both cause and victim of her own destruction, and her desire—the authentic core of her subjectivity—is made unintelligible by the very structures that punished it. Christine Mannon's death similarly disappears from O'Neill's dramatic economy. It is Lavinia's grief and Orin's madness that occupy centre stage, while Christine's own desire and suffering are retroactively pathologized as maternal devouring.

It is at this point that the feminist critical potential of abjection is most clearly articulated. By staging these ungrievable bodies, by forcing them into theatrical visibility and demanding that audiences reckon with their suffering, Kane and O'Neill perform a kind of counter-symbolic work. They do not simply represent what the patriarchal order excludes; they make that exclusion visible as violence, injustice, and constitutive injury that cannot be justified by the logic that produces it. In this sense, both plays operate as what we might call, "critical fabulations" of gender: theatrical interventions that expose the violence of normative gender structures by staging the destruction they produce.

Caryl Churchill's observation, cited by Aston that theatre's power lies in its capacity to make present what ideology renders absent is particularly apposite here (Aston, 2003: 58). Both Kane and O'Neill make present the abject: the female desire that patriarchal order cannot

contain, the male subjectivity that collapses when it confronts its own founding violence, the bodies that symbolic structures sacrifice in order to constitute themselves. Their dramaturgy is not pessimistic but critically diagnostic: it stages the pathologies of gender not to celebrate them but to make them legible as such—to render visible the violence that normative femininity and masculinity require and to demand, in doing so, that audiences imagine otherwise.

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that both Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* engage in a sustained and formally sophisticated deployment of abjection as a means of interrogating the gendered foundations of patriarchal symbolic order. Through Julia Kristeva's theoretical framework, supplemented by the insights of Luce Irigaray, Elaine Aston, and Judith Butler, the study stressed the feminist critical force and implication of both works. The female protagonists of both plays, Phaedra and Christine, emerge as subjects whose desire cannot be contained by the symbolic economies that seek to define and discipline them. Their abjection is not a natural condition but a political one: the product of systems that require the expulsion of unregulated femininity in order to constitute themselves. Their suffering and destruction are not the wages of personal transgression but the inevitable consequence of structural violence. Similarly, the male characters, Hippolytus, Ezra, and Orin are revealed not as stable agents of patriarchal authority but as subjects undone by their own symbolic investments, destabilized by the return of the abject they were supposed to have expelled.

At the level of form, both Kane and O'Neill deploy theatrical strategies that refuse the aesthetic containment of the abject: Kane through radical corporeal exposure and the dismantling of dramatic convention; O'Neill through Gothic repetition and the architectural staging of repression and its return. In both cases, the theatre becomes a space of critical confrontation rather than aesthetic consolation—a space in which the normative structures of gender are made visible as institutions, and therefore as contestable. In the final analysis, what unites these two playwrights across the distance of their historical and cultural contexts is a shared conviction that theatre must attend to what ideology cannot afford to acknowledge. The violence that constitutes the normal, the desire that exceeds the permissible, the bodies that survive or fail to survive the demands of symbolic order. In staging the abject, Kane and O'Neill do not simply diagnose the pathologies of their respective cultures; they perform, in the very act of theatrical representation, a demand for a different order of things—one in

which desire might be acknowledged without destruction, and in which the body might be inhabited without shame.

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