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Review: Marina Carr's *Girl on an Altar*

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Directed by Annabelle Comyn, Marina Carr's most recent play *Girl on an Altar* premiered on 19 May 2022 at the Kiln Theatre in London (in partnership with the Abbey Theatre, The National Theatre of Ireland). This British-Irish co-production presents another of Carr's adaptations of Greek tragedies, retelling the story of the reunion of Clytemnestra (Eileen Walsh) and Agamemnon (David Walmsley) after the Trojan War. As with Carr's other Greek adaptations—*By the Bog of Cats...* (1998), *Ariel* (2002), *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), and *Hecuba* (2015)—patriarchal narratives are subverted by the foregrounding of women's experiences. *Girl on an Altar* presents Clytemnestra as a suffering mother who is asked to forgive her husband for the unimaginable, the murder of their daughter. The play also elaborates on the story of Cassandra (Nina Bowers), a young Trojan princess who is brought back from the war as Agamemnon's slave. Toxic masculinity looms large over *Girl on an Altar*, and Agamemnon's actions are shown as unforgivable, despite the character's complex portrayal.

Presenting the Trojan War as an unjustifiable genocide, Carr subverts the traditional narrative of a heroic conquest. Agamemnon is portrayed as a narcissistic leader of Greek armies whose insecurity over his position, as he fears that Achilles might overthrow him, leads him to murder his daughter in a public spectacle orchestrated by priests. *Girl on an Altar* thematises the larger political and social landscape, as well as the intimate relationships between Carr's characters. Tom Piper's stage set is dominated by a voluptuous double bed on which many of the conflicts takes place. It is on this bed that Clytemnestra changes places with Cassandra as the plot progresses, and where she eventually murders her husband. In *Girl on an Altar*, as in *Hecuba*, Carr lets her characters tell the audience about most events, rather than staging them as actions, but rape and murder are performed in full on stage. Tall dark walls made of wooden planks surround the theatrical space, giving it a claustrophobic atmosphere evoking the state of entrapment of Carr's characters, while smoke blown in at intervals combines with Amy Mae's lighting, adding a feeling of confusion and despair.

Rewriting the story of the Greek chief Agamemnon's siege and conquest of Troy, captured in the Homeric poems, and later adapted for stage by fifth-century BC Athenian playwrights, Carr tilts the lens to re-examine the position and role of Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra. In *Agamemnon*, the first play of Aeschylus' trilogy *The Oresteia*, Clytemnestra is portrayed as a

scheming, vengeful, and power-hungry monstrosity of a woman who kills her hero spouse upon his victorious arrival home. Punished by their son Orestes, Clytemnestra is murdered and found deserving of this fate at a trial in Athens. Challenging Aeschylus' narrative that insists on the lesser worth of women over men, Carr emphasises Clytemnestra's suffering as a mother and woman.

According to tradition, the Greek army could not sail for Troy until the gods were appeased by the sacrifice of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's elder daughter, Iphigenia. In *The Oresteia*, the act is only briefly mentioned to add context for what comes next, the murder of Agamemnon. Later, Euripides focused an entire play, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, on the sacrifice, ending his play with Iphigenia's consent to die in support of her father's military venture. Carr uses a part of Euripides' storyline, in which Agamemnon lies about his intentions and pretends that Iphigenia is to be married to Achilles. Owing to this deception, Clytemnestra is tricked into bringing her daughter to the soldiers' camp. As in her earlier play *Hecuba*, Carr rejects the original narrative of the sacrifice of a young girl as a noble act, using it instead as a symbol for the larger themes explored in her theatre, as well as a primary explanation for Clytemnestra's actions.

In Carr's version of the narrative, there is little of the glory traditionally attributed to the Greeks, except for the love that all, including Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, have for each other—despite the destructive havoc of omnipresent male hunger for power. While the women are defined by their suffering and motherly devotion to their children, Agamemnon and his cousin Aegisthus (Daon Broni) will always fight for their own place on top of the hierarchy, valuing it above all else. However, Carr makes one exception and inserts Clytemnestra's father Tyn-dareus (Jim Findley) into the narrative, a war hero past his prime. Unlike all other men in the play, this king wages a war to protect, rather than capture, taking the side of his female relatives.

Girl on an Altar remains located in the mythical past of the Bronze Age, although some aspects, such as the characters' clothes (supervised by Isobel Pellow), are contemporary. This, along with the colour-blind casting and a variety of actors' accents make the issues at the core of the play stand out as universal, atemporal ones. While Carr's *Hecuba*, also retelling the story of the Trojan War, reacted to the ongoing war in Syria, *Girl on an Altar* feels like a commentary on the ongoing war in Ukraine. This connection is coincidental, as Carr had finished *Girl on an Altar* by last year's rehearsed reading on 5 March 2021. However, as the play brings to the fore the (absence of) reasons for waging war and emphasises its consequences, it is a timely commentary on real events, be they contemporary or historical.

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