From Epic Tragedy to Tragic Epic: *Marina Carr's* Hecuba, Girl on an Altar, *and* iGirl

Da tragédia épica para a épica trágica: Hecuba, Girl on an Altar e iGirl *de Marina Carr*

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Abstract: *This article examines the genre of "epic tragedy" in two of the most recent adaptations of Greek tragedy by Marina Carr,* Hecuba *(2015) and* Girl on an Altar *(2022), as well as its reversal to produce a "tragic epic" in* iGirl *(2021). In the* Poetics, *Aristotle establishes a stark distinction between the genres of epic and tragedy. Yet, this distinction has been challenged throughout history in dramatic practices – in Euripides and Shakespeare's tragic plays for instance – and theories – most notably by the emergence of epic theatre coined by Bertolt Brecht. Drawing from all these traditions, this article highlights Carr's process of "epicisation" of tragedy through the implementation of a new form of dramatic speech and dramatisation of a narrative rather than a plot in* Hecuba *and* Girl on an Altar. *These strategies have influenced the creation of* iGirl, *which is a postmodern epic brought on stage through the lens of tragedy.*

Keywords: *Marina Carr; Epic; Tragedy;* Hecuba; Girl on an Altar; iGirl.

Resumo: *Este artigo examina o gênero da "tragédia épica" em duas das mais recentes adaptações da tragédia grega por Marina Carr,* Hécuba *(2015) e* Girl on an Altar *(2022), bem como sua inversão para produzir um "épico trágico" em* iGirl *(2021). Na* Poética, *Aristóteles estabelece uma distinção clara entre os gêneros épico e tragédia. No entanto, essa distinção tem sido desafiada ao longo da história em práticas dramáticas – nas peças trágicas de Eurípides e Shakespeare, por exemplo – e teorias – principalmente pelo surgimento do teatro épico cunhado por Bertolt Brecht.*

Com base em todas essas tradições, este artigo destaca o processo de Carr de "epicização" da tragédia por meio da implementação de uma nova forma de discurso dramático e da dramatização de uma narrativa em vez de um enredo em Hécuba *e* Girl on an Altar. *Essas estratégias influenciaram a criação de iGirl, que é um épico pós-moderno levado ao palco pelas lentes da tragédia.*

Palavras-chave: *Marina Carr; Épico; Tragédia;* Hecuba; Girl on an Altar; iGirl.

Marina Carr has produced an extensive body of work adapting Greek tragedy. The Midlands plays, which propelled her career as one of the leading contemporary Irish playwrights, rely heavily on classical intertextualities. *By the Bog of Cats…* (1998) and *Ariel* (2002) translocate respectively Euripides' *Medea* and the tragic myth of the Atrides in a modern Irish context. Furthermore, the protagonists of *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996) bear significant resemblances with some famous female characters in Greek tragedy: Millie and The Mai appear as Electra-like figures (Chacón 482; Murphy 390), and the character of Portia re-enacts some of the constitutive features of Medea (Murphy 390) and Antigone (Chacón 482). The following play based on a Greek tragedy produced by Carr is *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), which illustrates a new phase in her dramatic work. While the Midlands cycle offers a "misconstructed naturalism" (Jordan 258) as "the myth … take[s] precedence over the real" (*Ibid.* 245), the new phase of Carr's work seems to focus on "iconic … figures", mostly women, which include Phaedra and Hecuba (Lonergan 133).

The centrality of the "iconic female figures" does not however constitute a major transformation of Carr's dramatic style since her whole body of work shows a strong interest in the representation of women's positions and situations both in the canon and society.[1] The actual innovations of this new phase concern the construction and dramatisation of the canonical stories that Carr adapts. She uses dramatic strategies developed in the Midlands cycle but goes further in the experimentation to interrogate the influence of the storyteller's identity in the construction and reception of the story. *Phaedra Backwards*, based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*, is the first implementation of that strategy to the adaptation of a Greek tragedy. The temporal "fluidity" (Sihra 260) of *Phaedra Backwards*, which interweaves Phaedra's present with her family's past, echoes the non-chronological construction of *The Mai* and *Portia Coughlan*. The maze of temporalities[2] positions Phaedra at the centre of the story not only as its protagonist but also as its teller. The

prologue epitomises that dimension as it shows the present through the appearance of the adult character on stage as well as the past through the images of her childhood displayed on a screen. The use of this device shows Carr's first attempt at "epicising"[3] Greek tragedy. In epic theatre, the inclusion of films "effect[s] temporal disjunctions within the dramatic action, resulting in multilayered/multi-perspectival performances" (Macintosh 4). In *Phaedra Backwards*, the screen offers the audience a glimpse at the interiority of Phaedra, thus indicating that her perspective is about to interfere with the canonical version of the myth as she narrates herself into it. Yet, this dimension is explored more clearly and extensively in Carr's following plays based on Greek tragedies, *Hecuba* (2015) and *Girl on an Altar* (2022), as the form of the dramatic speech conveys the "multilayered/multi-perspectival performances" in the play.

Hecuba and *Girl on an Altar* form a diptych. Narratively, the former adapts Euripides' *Hecuba*. Its action is preceded by the events of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and followed by those of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, on which *Girl on an Altar* is based. Formally, Carr shows the characters' "inner feelings as well as [their] external thoughts in … direct address[es] to the audience" (Sihra 268). Fiona Macintosh has referred to and analysed this experimental form of speech as "epic tragedy" ("Playwright Marina Carr in conversation with Fiona Macintosh"). Yet, there is no in-depth analysis of that concept in *Hecuba* and *Girl on an Altar* to grasp its performability and significance in Carr's body of work. Furthermore, this concept lays the ground to grasp the dramatic strategy of her play, *iGirl* (2021), which does not rely on a single story but interweaves myths and autobiographical elements to elaborate a postmodern tragic epic on death and extinction.

Hecuba: The Foundation of Epic Tragedy

The first lines of *Hecuba* unsettle the audience's expectations regarding dramatic speech. The eponymous character provides a description of the setting in which she stands: "So I'm in the throne room. Surrounded by the limbs, torsos, heads, corpses of my sons. My women trying to dress me, blood between my toes, my sons' blood, six of them, seven of them, eight?" (Carr 2015, 211) The character brings the action to the spectators through her words only as Carr has declared that there "cannot" be "any illustration in this play, it has to be completely on the line" ("Playwright Marina Carr in conversation with Fiona Macintosh"). Yet, as the dramatic action is not enacted but narrated by the characters, Carr breaks the essential distinction between epic and tragedy.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes that both genres are "mimesis of elevated matters", but tragedy relies on "the mode of enactment, not narrative" (Aristotle 47), contrary to epic. However, the line setting the two genres apart is not as rigid as it might seem. Macintosh and Justine McConnell indeed note that "one third of the Homeric epics are in direct speech" (Macintosh and McConnell 4), a feature noticed by Aristotle since he described these works as "combining narrative with direct personation" (Aristotle 34). He does not however consider that combination in tragedy, even though the chorus often narrates myths.[4] Carr has never included this dramatic persona *per se* in her adaptations of Greek tragedies, but she has drawn inspiration from them to coin the form of dramatic speech of *Hecuba* as she considers that "everybody is everybody's else chorus" ("Playwright Marina Carr in conversation with Fiona Macintosh").

In Greek tragedy, the chorus is a collective entity embodied by a group of Athenian citizens. They do not perform any action on stage.[5] Yet, the chorus often concludes the tragedies to reveal their ethical stances as the heroic actions are "the subjects of a debate" (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 24). This function appears ostensibly in Carr's epicisation of tragedy in *Hecuba* as the play ends with the eponymous character's daughter Cassandra stating:

> [The Greeks] said many things about [Hecuba] after, that she killed those boys, blinded Polymestor, went mad, howled like a dog along this shore. The Acheans wanted to get their stories down, their myth in stone, their version, with them as the heroes always, noble, fair, merciful. No. They were the wild dogs, the barbarians, the savages who came as guests and left an entire civilisation on its knees and in the process defiled its queen and her memory. (Carr 2015, 259-260)

Yet, this final address shows that it is not the action that is up to debate in the play, but its construction in the canon, which implies that Hecuba has been wrongfully accused of these crimes. The overlap of the two distinctive character types – choral and heroic – of Greek tragedy through Cassandra subverts the mimesis. Not only does she break the fourth wall – like the chorus does in Greek tragedy – but she also steps out of the traditional position of the dramatic character to embrace the status of an "authorial narrator" (Wallace 522) as her conclusive lines bring on stage the playwright's opinion about the dramatisation of the myth by Euripides. During a TEDx talk at DCU, Carr disclosed that she had "never agreed on the verdict on" Hecuba displayed in the classical tragedy, but the Greeks "needed to get certain myths in stone to bolster their sense of themselves and validate their savage conquests" and "it was easy to trash Hecuba" because "she was the enemy" and "a woman"

("That Trojan Queen"). In this regard, Cassandra as a narrator echoes some aspects and purposes of the *Verfremdungseffect* ("the estrangement effect"), which typifies the characters' construction in epic theatre as conceived by Bertolt Brecht. Carr's "response to Euripides" (*Ibid.*) invites the audience to question the ideological tenets in which Western myths are embedded as she implies that the traditional and canonical demonisation of Hecuba is the product of the ancient Greeks' belligerence and misogyny. Despite being created between the archaic and classical periods,[6] the "archetypes of females" displayed in ancient myths are still engrained "in western consciousness", which fuels "the societal need to control and marginalise" women as noted by Carr (Leavy).

In Carr's *Hecuba* like in Greek tragedy, the conclusion is carefully prepared. In classical plays, the action is regularly paused with songs by the chorus. These moments prompt the audience's reflection as they offer comments on the action. The narration of myths fuels these comments "to enlarge . . . [the] vision of human experience, encountered in tragedy ... in claustrophobic confines of time and space" (Gould 411), thus offering a variety of perspectives on the ethical issue at stake in the tragedy. In Carr's *Hecuba*, the multiplication of perspectives stems from the narration of a single action by several characters. This "polyphony . . . challeng[es] . . . the authority of received narratives" (Wang 412) and invites the audience to reconsider the meaning of the action dramatised in Euripides' *Hecuba*. The death of Polyxena epitomises that dimension.

In Euripides' tragedy, the sacrifice celebrates the civilised quality of the Greeks on one hand because, unlike "barbarian peoples", they "hono[ur] those who have died noble deaths, so that Greece may prosper" (Euripides 427), and the submission of women to men on the other hand through Polyxena's willingness to die as she shows "supreme bravery and surpassing nobility" during the murderous ritual (*Ibid.*, 451). This event participates in the construction of Hecuba as a monster. Her action of blinding Polymestor and killing his sons displays excess, which is associated with improper womanhood (Rabinowitz 142) and barbarism, since he is responsible for the murder of only one of her children.

In Carr's *Hecuba*, four characters narrate the sacrifice: the sacrificer, Agamemnon, the sacrificed, Polyxena, the eponymous character, and Odysseus. Polyxena's description of her own gestures highlights her anxiety as her "hands [are] slick with sweat" (Carr 2015, 243). Her death is not brave but "embarrassing" as she discloses her discomfort "to die like this in front of everyone" (*Ibid.*). The three other characters depict the "butchering" of her body, the "blood whistling in her throat" while she "rasp[es]" and "chock[es]" (*Ibid.*, 245). Polyxena's death is not noble but gory. In addition to the physical pain, Carr includes emotional suffering in the scene through Hecuba's speech. While she witnesses her child

dying, Hecuba remembers the day of her birth when "Priam" was "terrified" that she "wouldn't make it or the baby would be harmed", concluding that Polyxena "has come to great harm" (*Ibid.*, 245-246). The horror of the sacrifice is further emphasised by its uselessness as Agamemnon's inner thoughts reveal the theatrics of the ritual. He indeed does not believe that the action will conjure the wind and wonders if the Greek army truly "believe[s] this shit" (*Ibid.*, 241). As the crowd gets "angry" because the wind does not start blowing after the sacrifice, Agamemnon pretends that "the voice of Achilles speaks through" him, which makes "the fuckers . . . quiet" (*Ibid.*, 246). In this regard, the sacrifice of Polyxena is not a celebration of the Greek identity but forecasts the conclusion drawn by Cassandra, according to which "The Acheans . . . were . . . the barbarians" (*Ibid.*, 259).

Besides offering a diversity of perspectives questioning the canonical structure and significance of the myth, the epicisation of tragedy enables the audience's reflection through the characters' critical stance on their own actions. The dramatic speech "switch[es] ... between subjectivity and objectivity" (Macintosh 13) through the overlap of narration and enactment. This places the characters in a situation of "acting as if [they] were spectators of [their] own" actions (*Ibid.*, 11). Euripides' tragedies appear as the ideal source for implementing this feature of epic tragedy. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche indeed blames Euripides for including "a critical distance" in his tragedies, thus producing a "dramatised epic", which would have caused the death of tragedy and yet is used by Carr in her adaptation of *Hecuba* (*Ibid.*). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche notes that "[t]he actor in [Euripides'] dramatic epic remains at the profoundest level for ever a rhapsode; the consecration of the inner dreaming settles over all his actions so that he is never completely an actor" (Nietzsche 69). A dimension that is fully revealed through the dramatic speech of Carr's *Hecuba* because, besides blending narrative and enactment, it also overlaps "soliloquy and dialogue" (Sihra 268), which enables the dramatisation of the characters' self-reflection, thus preventing their demonisation.

There is no monster in Carr's *Hecuba*. This dimension has been discussed only about the eponymous character's loss of agency contrasting with the source tragedy (Torrance 265; Wallace 523). Hecuba is indeed not responsible for blinding Polymestor and killing his sons, the Greek army is. Subsequently, she does not turn into "a dog with fiery eyes" (Euripides 515), but the Greeks are the "wild dogs" (Carr 2015, 259) who perpetuated a "genocide" (*Ibid.*, 212). Yet, their leader Agamemnon is not demonised. His speeches show self-reflection on his actions as the head of the Greek army as he witnesses the suffering caused to the Trojans by the war and the fall of Troy. The sight of Polyxena's "frail, too thin" half-naked body makes him wonder if they "[h]ave ... been starving"

the Trojans (*Ibid.*, 243). And, as he watches Hecuba crying after her daughter's death, he realises that the army "should've taken her out with Priam" (*Ibid.*, 249) to avoid her further sorrows. These comments manifest Agamemnon's empathy for his enemies on the one hand, and his lack of control over the situation on the other.

Despite being the king of kings, Agamemnon is not omnipotent but is subjected to external forces. Unlike Greek tragedy, fate does not rule over the character's actions, his position within the army does. Agamemnon's remembrance of Iphigenia's sacrifice, which occurred ten years before the action of *Hecuba*, demonstrates that point. He "could've fled with" his daughter to "ke[ep] her alive. But [he] chose" not to (*Ibid.* 232). This enacts the Brechtian conception of characterisation in epic theatre, which relies on the construction of "the human being ... as 'the sum of all social circumstances'" (Brecht 46). In *Hecuba*, Agamemnon must sacrifice young girls to prove he is "the rightful king", "to keep [the rest of the army] off his back" (Carr 2015, 232-233). In doing so, Carr applies one of the key elements of epic theatre to Greek tragedy, which is that "the human being is the object of the inquiry" (Brecht 37). Through the epicisation of *Hecuba*, she turns the mythological characters enacting the myth into subjects of a psycho-social study[7] (Torrance 2022, 201) to grasp the past and present of contemporary Western societies since "we are ... playing out the legacy of Troy, and we are what's left because Troy is in rubble ... they knew a harsher world that would become Greece, . . . that has become us" ("Playwright Marina Carr in conversation with Fiona Macintosh"). At the time of the premiere, a parallel was drawn with the situation in the Middle East where the Iraqi and Syrian populations suffer terrible exactions from the dictator Bashar al-Assad and the terrorist group ISIS. Yet, although "[t]hese wars", which had been enabled by the multiple imperialist Western interventions, are "completely wiping out [these] countries[,] . . . no one in the West batted an eyelid" as noted by Carr (Sihra 2018, 267). In *Girl on an Altar*, Carr pursues the project of questioning the founding myths of the Western identity by furthering the epicisation of tragedy.

Girl on an Altar: The Extension of Epic Tragedy

Girl on an Altar dramatises events happening before and after the action of *Hecuba*. Act One is indeed based on Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which deals with Iphigenia's sacrifice to allow the Greeks to leave for Troy, while Act Two adapts Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, which shows the return of Agamemnon from Troy and his subsequent murder by Clytemnestra to avenge the death of their daughter.

The action crafted by Carr in *Girl on an Altar* is too extensive to fit the Aristotelian conception of tragedy and thus displays some characteristic features of epic poetry. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that the two genres "differ in length: tragedy tends so far as possible to stay within a single revolution of the sun, or close to it, while epic is unlimited in time span and is distinctive in this respect" (Aristotle 47). The length influences the story produced: while "tragedy is mimesis of an action" (*Ibid.,* 47), which constitutes its "first principle": the "[p]lot" (*Ibid.*, 53), epic poetry "is less unified" and shows "multiple actions" (*Ibid.,*139). Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* illustrate the unity of the tragic action, which is unsettled by Carr's combination of the two plays in *Girl on an Altar*. The subversion of the Aristotelian length and unity of the tragic action must once again be connected to the influence of Brecht. He indeed differentiates "dramatic theatre" based on "plot[s]" from "epic theatre" relying on "narrative[s]" (Brecht 37). In *Girl on an Altar*, Carr's concern does not lie in the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the murder of Agamemnon but in the narrative of Clytemnestra who metamorphoses from a loving wife into a husband-killer throughout the play.

Besides the inclusion of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Carr extends the time of the action of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In that source tragedy, Agamemnon dies on the day of his return from Troy. In the second act of *Girl on an Altar*, several months, even years, occur between these two events. This new timeline enables Carr to interweave actions from her own creation within the classical narrative, which appeals to another conception of epic. In "Theatre on an Epic Scale", the British director Tim Supple elaborates on his vision of epic performances. Diverging slightly from Aristotle's definition, Supple considers the characteristic magnitude of epic beyond the length of the narrative and applies it to constitutive elements of theatre, including the spaces of production (Supple, 47), the number of spectators, "the words", " the ideas", and "the characters' actions" (*Ibid.*, 51). In this regard, Supple envisions Greek tragedy as "theatre on an epic scale" (*Ibid.*). In terms of "content", classical drama is epic according to him because it encompasses "the vitality and complexity of human action, choice, and experienced outcome" (*Ibid.*). However, Supple notices a conventional feature of classical theatre contradicting his epic vision of Greek tragedy: "the numbers performing, the scale of performance, was not epic" (*Ibid.*). The classical convention of having only three actors – alongside a chorus of fifteen citizens – on stage speaks directly to the "claustrophobic" scope of Greek tragedy, and so to the length of the tragic plot. Yet, such a contradiction vanishes when the theatre of another canonical pillar of Western drama is considered: Shakespeare.

In *Girl on an Altar*, Carr's epicisation of tragedy relies on a reconfiguration of classical drama through the lens of Shakespearean theatre. In Supple's mind, Shakespeare is "an elemental, metaphysical, epic social dramatist" whose work is embedded in "family drama" while simultaneously "concerned with the workings of power, the nature of governance, the ethics of authority, the workings of law, the struggle of humanity to come to terms with fate and to endure life sufferings and disappointments" (*Ibid.*, 59). These themes are entangled in Greek tragedy too, as its focus on kings and queens implies that the hamartia has implications in domestic and political terms. Yet, they are usually addressed through a single action performed by the tragic hero. Free from the restrictions on the length of the plot and the number of actors, Shakespeare multiplies the subplots to explore the consequences of the initial incident on the public and private realms while underlining their interconnections. The length of *Girl on an Altar* gives a similar opportunity to Carr, who examines subsequently the outcome of Iphigenia's sacrifice in a more Shakespearean than classical way. In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus stresses a direct causal link between the titular character's death and his daughter's, which Carr complicates in her adaptation. Unlike her classical counterpart, Carr's Clytemnestra does not simply feel hate for Agamemnon after his return from Troy as her inner thoughts reveal that she still "love[s] him" (Carr 2022, 34). These conflicting feelings entrench the family drama included in the course of action created by Carr. It shows the gradual estrangement of the couple from one another and the progressive substitution of Clytemnestra by Cassandra at the side of Agamemnon. This new line of events reframes Iphigenia's death as the first of a long series of abuses endured by women at the hands of Agamemnon, which Clytemnestra's detention in the harem epitomises as it causes the death of her youngest child, Leda. Yet, this situation does not speak only to the oppression of women within the family cell but also within the political system set by Agamemnon after Iphigenia's death.

Girl on an Altar opens with Iphigenia's sacrifice, which thus constitutes the founding moment of Agamemnon's rule that comes to a conclusion with his murder by Clytemnestra in the final moment of the play. Such a structure echoes the discussion about histories in theatre – which a substantial part of Shakespeare's work illustrates – in terms of generic innovation as "a fusion of Aristotle's tragedy with the genre of epic, which focuses on the birth and rise of nations and empires" (Hoenselaars 138) as well as their fall. This overlap of the genres could also be applied to some of Shakespeare's tragedies, like *Macbeth* (1606), which shows a king's rise and fall in power over the course of several years. Like Macbeth, Agamemnon's deadly ascension to power defines the ruler he is. He shows through Iphigenia's sacrifice "what the king of the kings is made of" (Carr 2022, 16), which

is a ruthless tyrant whose power stems from the annihilation of women. As Clytemnestra hears about the sacrifice of "another girl before [the Greek army] left Troy", she states: "It's becoming a habit. Soon it'll be normal and before you can turn round it'll be a law" (*Ibid.*, 35). The future proves her right as several months – perhaps years – later "[a]n orphan girl [is] sacrificed" by Agamemnon as his legitimacy over the throne is challenged after his proclamation that he "ha[s] no Queen" anymore (*Ibid.*, 41). The annihilation of women fuelling his autocratic power is indeed not only literal but also symbolic as Clytemnestra's incarceration in the harem marks her erasure from the Argian political scene. This reframes the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, which concludes the play. The action does not stand as a simple act of revenge but rather appears as a necessary act of survival and liberation for the women in Argos.

Despite dramatising Agamemnon's rise and fall, *Girl on an Altar* focuses more on the victims of his abuses, and more specifically those suffered by Clytemnestra. In doing so, Carr reverses the traditional – patriarchal – characterisation of that figure as "a monstrous androgyne" who "usurps male power and prerogatives" (Zeitlin 89), which necessarily questions the political intentions of the source tragedy. *Agamemnon* is the first instalment of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, a trilogy that "gives voice and form to the social and political ideology of the period" embedded in patriarchy (*Ibid.*, 87) that has moulded the contemporary Western societies. Building on the "symmetry" of Polyxena and Iphigenia's sacrifices (Carr 2015, 231), Carr uses the myths of Greek tragedy to create an epic of patriarchy, and its destructivity is emphasised by the dramatisation through tragedy. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle indeed defines tragedy as dramatising "a change … from prosperity to adversity, caused … by a great error of a character" (Aristotle 71). Through Agamemnon's dramatic arc, Carr makes patriarchy fall by its own dismiss.

iGirl echoes the experiments implemented in *Hecuba* and *Girl on an Altar*, which Carr seems to reverse to create a tragic epic.

iGirl: The Reversal of Epic Tragedy

iGirl is a solo performance. Yet, several characters appear on stage. They are associated with a variety of historical eras ranging from the prehistoric to the contemporary periods. And they come from a diversity of materials, including history (Neanderthal and Jeanne d'Arc), Greek tragedy (Antigone, Oedipus, and Jocasta) and mythology (Persephone), and autobiography (Carr herself). The characters do not interact with one another through dialogue. Each of them narrates individually their own stories in one or several dedicated

sections of the play. This dimension coupled with the use of verse rather than prose leads Isabelle Torrance to label the scenes as "poems" (Torrance 2022, 197). In this regard, the style of *iGirl* is reminiscent of classical epic, which is a poetic work of narration.

Although some of the poems deal with the same story – the sections narrated by Antigone, Oedipus, and Jocasta retell the events related in Sophocles' Theban cycle (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*) from each of their individual perspectives –, *iGirl* does not dramatise a single cohesive narrative as classical epic does. In Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, the narration includes several subplots but they are connected through a main narrative signalled in the opening line of the epic: "The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles" (Homer 13). In *iGirl*, however, the tragedy underlying each of the poems unifies the stories, which all deal with the "fall" of the characters in terms of loss, death, extinction, grief, posterity, and memory. The final lines epitomise that dimension as a parallel is drawn between the ancient gods and our species to wonder what will remain after the death and extinction of humanity at an individual as well as collective level:

> Human specimen
> He will record
> Homo sapiens
> Question mark
> Homini
> Possibly
> The old gods
> That vanished tribe
> Stuff of myth
> Barely a trace of them
> Survives. (Carr 2021, 83)

This tragic fate is propelled by the violent appetite of humanity. The first poem asserts blatantly that "The wrong species / Survived" because "We destroyed the Neanderthals / The gentle mute Neanderthals" (*Ibid.*, 4-5). The collection of narratives presented in *iGirl* stands as "Shared stories of carnage / And . . . / Destruction" (*Ibid.*, 11). This history of violence is mapped through the single performer's body[8] who plays the Neanderthal, Antigone – who died because she "argued like a man" (*Ibid.*, 12) –, and Jeanne d'Arc – who was "burned . . . at the stake" (*Ibid.*, 8).

Carr thus appears to apply to tragedy the postmodern experimentations implemented with the emergence of "rhapsodic theatre". This theatrical form has been

coined by Jean-Pierre Sarrazac and shows Homeric as well as Brechtian influences on approaching the dramatisation of stories (Macintosh and McConnell 16-17). In rhapsodic theatre, the "narrative" emerges from "fragmented" stories that are "reassembled into new forms, collage-like" relying on a "combination of forms and genres" (*Ibid.*, 17-18). According to Macintosh and McConnell, "rhapsodic theatre finds its parallel in the syncretization of myths from diverse times and places in a number of recent works, in which both form and content combine to create new collages" (*Ibid.*, 18), which Carr's *iGirl* not only illustrates but also seems to further to some extent.

Contrastingly with the examples provided by Macintosh and McConnell, *iGirl* is a solo performance. In this respect, the single performer – Olwen Fouéré in the 2021 production at the Abbey Theatre – stands as the sole physical carrier of the "new collage" on stage, thus echoing the role of the rhapsode when classical epic was still performed. Yet, the performer is not assimilated with a storyteller since she embodies each of the characters narrating their stories,[9] as underlined by the opening line of several poems: "I Jeanne d'Arc" (Carr 2021, 8), "I Antigone" (*Ibid.*, 10), "I Oedipus" (*Ibid.*, 22), "I Jocasta" (*Ibid.*, 27), "I Neanderthal Prince of the Plains" (*Ibid.*, 51), and "I Girl" (*Ibid.*, 33). This last dramatic persona refers to Carr herself as revealed through the reflection on posterity provided in that specific poem as the narrator imagines the way her descendants will describe her:

> She wrote plays
> Now out of print
> That's where you get
> Your creative bent
> The great-great-granddaughter
> Will say
> To her well loved
> Son or
> Daughter
> When they want to be an actor (*Ibid.*)

Although Carr, who as the playwright of *iGirl* is the storyteller, writes herself into the play, she does not write herself as the storyteller and is thus not embodied as such by the performer who plays her character. This asserts the dramatic dimension of the epic that is *iGirl*.

iGirl brings epic onto the stage, especially considering the specific form of the eighteenth poem. Unlike the other poems of *iGirl*, the eighteenth poem does not show a

narration but a dialogue between two unidentified characters, both embodied by the single performer. This echoes the overlap of narration and enactment in the genre of epic poetry to which Aristotle refers in the *Poetics*. Yet, while this overlap relies usually on the use of some dialogue interwoven in narration, some modernist writers have pushed the overlap further by experimenting with the integration of pieces of dramatic writing into novels. The epic novel *Ulysses* (1920) by James Joyce, which draws inspiration from Homer's *Odyssey* to narrate the peregrinations of the character of Leopold Bloom in Dublin, is an epitome of such experimentation. Indeed, the fifteenth episode – and the episode of Circe – assumes the form of a play, displaying only dialogues and stage directions. *iGirl* is reminiscent of that modern input to the genre of epic, even though it breaks with its modernist foregrounding. The dialogue does not reveal any spatiotemporal elements of context besides the fact that the gods "are all gone", only their "names survive" (*Ibid.*, 62-63), thus pursuing the postmodern epic exploration of the tragic themes of extinction and posterity outside the frame of a grand narrative.

Carr's implementation of epic tragedy in *Hecuba* and *Girl on an Altar* and tragic epic in *iGirl* settles in and compiles a long tradition of blending the genres of epic and tragedy. Although this question seems to be restricted to Brecht's counter-theorisation of Aristotle's conceptualisation of epic and drama as distinctive genres in the *Poetics*, the history of theatre shows that the overlap of these two generic forms is an enduring practice. From Homer's inclusion of dialogue to postmodern "rhapsodic theatre", epic and drama appear to have constantly colluded, especially in the realm of tragedy with Euripides' "dramatised epic" and Shakespeare's epic-length plays. Yet, never has that collusion come across as clearly as in Carr's latest adaptations of Greek tragedy. Through the blending of enactment and narration, dialogue and soliloquy, objectivity and subjectivity in the dramatic speech of *Hecuba* and *Girl on an Altar*, she questions and challenges the founding myths of Western societies. The diversity of perspectives emerging from that strategy reframes the focus on the oppressed rather than the oppressors, thus writing the epic tragedy of the barbaric system that is patriarchy in that diptych of plays. In *iGirl*, Carr reverses the genre implemented in *Hecuba* and *Girl on an Altar* as epic takes precedence over tragedy to write the tragic epic of human extinction, which traces the human history of destruction through a collection of seemingly unrelated stories and the refusal of a grounding narrative.

Notes

1   Sihra examines that question in detail in her monograph *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown*.

2   Sihra considers that the play "offers circuitous pathways which … open up a maze of possibilities" (Sihra 260).

3   Macintosh mentions Carr's "epicisation" of tragedy only in relation to *Hecuba*.

4   This idea is based on a comment made by one of my students, Mats Van Sluis, during a lecture on Aristotle's *Poetics*.

5   Euripides' *Hecuba* stands as an exception to that rule as the Trojan women composing the chorus help the eponymous character to blind Polymestor and kill his sons.

6   Although Greek tragedy is an art that was developed during the classical time, it adapted myths from epic poetry created during the archaic period.

7   Torrance notes that *Girl on an Altar* "explores the deeper psychologies of the mythological characters and their motivations", but this comment also applies to *Hecuba*.

8   This idea has been inspired by Elin Diamond's comment: "Understanding gender as ideology – as a system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of women and men which reinforces a social status quo – is to appreciate the continued timeliness of *Verfremdungseffekt*, the purpose of which always is to denaturalize and defamilarize what ideology – and performativity – makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable" (Diamond 47).

9   Macintosh and McConnell indeed note that "[u]nlike a traditional actor, the storyteller does not embody a character; they are present as themselves" (Macintosh and McConnell 6)

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