

REVIEW

Feminist Versions of Greek Tragedy in the Theater of Marina Carr

Mária Kurdi

Paul, Salomé. *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity*. New York and London: Routledge, 2024. 203 pages. ISBN 978-1-032-28887-1. Hb. £108.

Arguably, the internationally most well-known and appreciated woman playwright in contemporary Ireland is Marina Carr. This is also evidenced by the fact that after Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan's edited collection *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "before rules was made"* (Carysfort Press, 2003), four monographs on her oeuvre were published, including the one under review here. The three previous ones are: Rhona Trench's *Bloody Living: The Loss of Selfhood in the Plays of Marina Carr* (Peter Lang, 2010), *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* by Melissa Sihra (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and Dagmara Gizlo's *The Art of Experience: The Theatre of Marina Carr* (Cambridge UP, 2021). Two of these, Gizlo's and now Paul's, are by non-Anglophone authors, Polish and French respectively, highlighting the international ambition to approach the work of Marina Carr from new angles. The monographs and, beside them, many of the journal articles and essays belonging to the by now extensive amount of critical literature on Carr tend to interrogate the playwright's re-modeling of Greek tragedy but only part of their investigations engages with this theme. Paul's monograph is the first book-length study entirely dedicated to the analysis of the subject, which the author undertakes in a broad historical and cultural context.

To frame her explorations, in the "Introduction" to her monograph Paul describes the strict gender politics of ancient Greek tragedy and suggests that it has particular echoes in a largely conservative modern Ireland. Also, she acknowledges the recently quite fast developing adaptation studies, the distinctive terminology of which, it seems, needs re-definition in each and every case of concrete application. Carr's is a "feminist transposition of classic drama," Paul claims, which diverts classic tragedy "from its initial purpose of endorsing and supporting patriarchy to expose the alienation of women in patriarchal societies" (2). Thus, the author builds on the idea that ancient Greek theater foregrounds male supremacy as a communal force which a woman can question only at the risk of being shown as an unnatural monster. Carr's transpositions of Greek

drama, Paul hypothesizes, represent female monstrosity and tragic destiny as a consequence of patriarchal oppression and the resolute curbing if not severe punishing of women's oppositional views and behaviors. Regarding form, Carr's relevant dramatic texts deconstruct and redesign "the initial purpose of the genre," that of classical tragedy and its political meanings, to achieve the representation of "female subjectivity and agency" (14).

An intrinsic value of the book is that its argument extends from the transposition of *Medea* in *By the Bog of Cats*. . . (1998) and *The Oresteia* in *Ariel* (2002) to the as yet less analyzed, more recent Carr plays such as *Phaedra Backwards* (2011), *Hecuba* (2015), *iGirl* (2021), and *Girl on the Altar* (2022). In each case, Paul identifies the Greek sources which Carr uses creatively, tending to combine details from more than one ancient work and highlighting certain episodes at the expense of others to serve her purpose of revealing the distorting effects most women suffer due to their subsidiary state in the patriarchal society. The author discusses the plays side by side and in dialogue with each other across four main chapters, which are "From 'Woman' to Women on Stage," "Feminist Resistance to Patriarchal Myths," "Writing Like a Woman," and "Feminist Tragedy." Conspicuously, these titles reflect a strong kinship between the tenets of international feminist discourse and Paul's approach and lens. Her multi-level methodology can be best exemplified by her discussion of Carr's *Hecuba*, which draws on parts of two tragedies by Euripides, *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*. Euripides adopts the view of Hecuba, the queen of Troy as a monstrous woman in Greek mythology, criminalized for blinding Polymestor and murdering his sons in revenge for the death of her own children. In Carr's transposition it is the Greeks who perform those horrible and senseless acts and the final lines are given to Cassandra, a chorus-figure about the unjust monsterization of Hecuba by the winners of the war (48–49). Also, Paul points to a detail that Carr revises, namely Hecuba's daughter Polyxena's sacrifice by the Greeks. The young girl's body is bared to the waist before she is stabbed in the drama of Euripides; Carr's version retains the element of nudity, but Agamemnon is to cut the girl's throat, which "sheds light on the voyeuristic sadism of the sacrifice" and the action is reconceived "as a slaughter rather than a ritual" (61–62). The author also notes that unlike in Euripides, Carr's *Hecuba* is present at the sacrifice, emphasizing the helplessness and distress both she and Polyxena feel when in the violent hands of both the sexist and racist Greeks (79–81).

Paul argues that "a heavy sense of family doom" pervades Carr's transpositions, which is borrowed "from the classical conception of the

tragic flaw” (8). In her intersectional analysis of *By the Bog of Cats*. . ., Paul sets up a conversation involving different critical opinions regarding the interpretation of the marginalized, traveler protagonist Hester Swane’s horrifying deed of killing her own daughter. The sense of tragic doom, the scholar claims, pervades not only *By the Bog of Cats*. . ., but the two other plays in the Midlands cycle, *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996) as well as the drama *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000) which, though not based on Greek originals, all use classical intertexts (9). However, Paul’s tracing these intertextual resonances leads to debatable conclusions at some points. In *Portia Coughlan*, for instance, the scholar discovers another Medea figure because the character confesses to her husband that looking at her children she thinks of terrible accidents, weapons, and mutilations, which may reflect an overanxious person’s fears of her own unbridled fantasies. Paul even gets entangled into a contradiction by saying that “[d]espite her hatred for her children, Portia, however, never acts on her murderous urges. This reversal of Medea’s features and actions alludes to the process of turning a woman into a monster in the context of modern Ireland” (52–53). Neither does the author sound more convincing when she draws a parallel between Portia and Antigone on account of love for their respective brothers (66). In contrast, a most astute remark about the relationship of Gabriel and Portia occurs later in the book when Paul claims that, having become a wife and a mother confined to the family house, “Portia’s longing for her dead twin symbolises a quest for her lost agency” (132).

It is in the fourth chapter, “Feminist Tragedy,” that Paul makes conclusions regarding the generic innovations of Carr’s transpositions, unique in her estimation. Of the ancient Greek texts, the source of comparison here is Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its distinction between the epic and the dramatic. In Paul’s view, Carr “explores the overlap of epic and tragedy in her adaptations of Greek tragedies” and creates the genre “epic tragedy,” in fact a “feminist genre” (143, 153). According to the scholar, Carr’s “hybridisation of classical tragedy through the lens of epic theatre as coined by Brecht” appears in *Hecuba* for the first time (157). Indeed, this play consists of parallel narrations of enactment and dialogue, enabling the presence of multiple perspectives which involve the narrators’ comments on their own doings, tellingly demonstrated by the Greek victor, Agamemnon’s moralizing and self-justifying remarks. Thus, for Paul, the Brechtian vein of the play consists in the characters becoming spectators of their own actions. However, one wonders if the Irish storytelling tradition has had some influence on the undoubtedly complex technique in *Hecuba*.

The later drama, *iGirl*, is a monologue written for a single performer, a genre forming a new path in Carr's work but not in Irish theater, let me add. Paul describes it as "reminiscent of the genre of classical epic as it is a poetic work of narration," wonderfully played by Olwen Fouéré in the 2021 production of the play by the Abbey Theatre, embodying and voicing human violence and its gendered effects across the centuries (165, 167).

Salomé Paul's *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity* came out in the year when the playwright turned sixty, being at the zenith of her career, so it deserves to be called a celebratory monograph. It is noteworthy how conscious Paul is of translatability as an oft-ignored problem of adaptations and she can only be praised for having the original Greek texts included side by side with the English-language quotations from Greek drama, testifying also to her impressive classical erudition. Those interested in other modern dramatizations of famous Greek mythical women can find references in the book to the revised portrayal of Hecuba in adaptations by Jean-Paul Sartre and Tony Harrison, both highly politicized, Iphigenia by Edna O'Brien, Electra by Frank McGuinness, Medea by Brendan Kennelly, and the list goes on. All in all, *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy* is a must for researchers and admirers of Carr for its original insights and density of literary, philosophical, and theatrical references in the analyses as well as for the additional information about productions of the plays, providing actors' and theatre makers' names alongside characteristic details of the performances themselves. The volume is definitely worthy of being placed in the forefront, together with the other three monographs, on both the private and the library bookshelves showcasing Carr's work alongside textual documents of its international reception.

Mária Kurdi, Professor Emerita, Institute of English Studies, University of Pécs, Hungary.