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Author(s)	Shaughnessy, Lorna
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Staging Alfonso Reyes' *Ifigenia cruel*: The Challenges of Multi-Layered Narrative, Poetry and Anti-Theatricality.

Abstract

*Alfonso Reyes' play, 'Ifigenia cruel' (1924), has been the subject of critical analyses in the fields of Mexican Cultural Studies and Classical Receptions Studies. These have focused on the play's historical context, its relatedness to Reyes' biography and to Euripides' versions of the myth. There is, however, a marked absence of scholarly work on staging the play. Despite Reyes' canonical status as a writer and cultural figurehead, 'Ifigenia cruel' has enjoyed few production in mainstream Mexican theatre. This article identifies some of the challenges inherent in the text that help explain this, and examines these with reference to the 2014 production for the Mexican National Theatre. Drawing on Martin Puchner's work on Modernist Anti-Theatricality and Reyes' own commentaries on *Ifigenia Cruel*, it reveals conflicting impulses at work within the play and argues that the tensions generated by these produce significant challenges for its staging.*

Key words: Alfonso Reyes, Mexican Theatre, poetic drama, anti-theatricality.

Since its publication in 1924, Alfonso Reyes' *Ifigenia cruel* has attracted rigorous literary analyses, and its inclusion in 2013 in Edith Hall's *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris*, brought the play firmly into the field of Classical Receptions Studies. Valuable scholarship has been published on many aspects of this intriguing text: the historical backdrop of post-Revolutionary Mexico to the play's composition in the early 1920s (Del Río 1993: 105-121, Teja 2004: 237-73); its relatedness to Reyes' own biography, (Monreal 2004); and more recently, its relationship to the key sources of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Barrenechea 2012: 6-18, Hall 2013: 274-281, Shaughnessy 2017: 379-399). One field of

investigation where the play has not figured widely, however, is in Theatre and Performance Studies. The fact that the play has enjoyed few mainstream, professional productions in Mexico since its initial publication has limited its visibility for scholars who work in this area.¹ Given that Reyes is such a canonical figure whose work is intimately tied to the history of state cultural institutions in Mexico, its absence is all the more striking. One of the reasons for this absence from mainstream programming is the highly poetic nature of the text. The particular challenges this poses are explored here both textually, and in the context of the Mexican National Theatre's 2014 production, directed by Juliana Faesler. Recent scholarly work in the area of closet drama provides important insights into the tensions and difficulties that can arise when translating a highly poetic and stylised text into a stage performance. Martin Puchner's work on conscious and unconscious anti-theatricality in Modernist texts is especially sensitive to the tensions created by Modernist authors' distrust of audience response. This article proposes that anti-theatrical tendencies underlie both the text of *Ifigenia cruel* and Reyes' comments on it. Before we can proceed to examine the challenges of poetry and anti-theatricality, however, it is necessary to consider the surfeit of 'backstories' that inform and enrich its multi-layered narrative.

Mythical Narratives and Mexican History

The story of Iphigenia forms part of the Greek mythical cycle of the House of Atreus. According to the myth, Agamemnon and his fleet are gathered in Aulis, ready to set sail for Troy. In the absence of wind, however, the troops grow restless and mutiny hangs in the air. To win favourable winds he plans to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess Artemis. He summons her to Aulis, under the pretext of a betrothal to Achilles, but he promised wedding is a ruse that will lead her to the sacrificial altar. In some versions, among them Reyes', the goddess intervenes at the moment when the sacrificial blade is about to strike, and magically transports Iphigenia to Tauris

where she becomes Artemis' priestess, sacrificing foreigners who are shipwrecked on its shores. There, in many versions, (among them those of Euripides and Goethe), she lives in isolation from family and homeland until the arrival of her brother Orestes, who takes her back to Greece. Reyes' play opens with Iphigenia in Tauris. In his version, however, the intervention of the goddess has erased Iphigenia's memory of her father's betrayal and her escape from near-death. She has no recollection of the events of Aulis, and will only recover these memories on meeting Orestes. Reyes' play also departs radically from previous versions in its conclusion: rather than returning to Greece with Orestes to be reconciled with family and society, she chooses to stay in Tauris at the service of the goddess.

Betrayal is a theme that looms large in the most widely-known versions of the myth, as dramatized by Euripides, Aeschylus and others. It also looms large in the story of the violent death of Alfonso Reyes' father, General Bernardo Reyes, in 1913. General Reyes was favoured by the rising Partido Demócrata as a candidate for the position of Vice President, with a view to succeeding Porfirio Díaz in the Presidential Elections of 1910. The General's political popularity peaked around 1908, but he failed to take up the candidacy for the Vice Presidency, and was effectively removed from the race when he was sent to Europe on a military brief in 1909. He returned after the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910 to a changed political landscape. Many of his former supporters had switched allegiances to Francisco Madero, who was elected President in 1911. In an attempt to re-enter the political sphere, General Reyes launched a rebellion in Nuevo León which failed to gain momentum due to lack of support and Madero had him imprisoned in the capital. On 9 February 1913, he was sprung from the prison by his eldest son Rodolfo Reyes and General Mondragón, and led an assault on the National Palace, where he was shot and died. This was the beginning of the chaotic, ten-day period known as the 'Decena Trágica'. By 23 February, Mexico's elected President Francisco Madero and Vice President Pino

Suárez had been betrayed and murdered at the command of General Victoriano Huerta, who had been charged with their protection during the uprising.

Regardless of their individual political sympathies, in the aftermath of these tragic events the entire Reyes family were branded as traitors to the Revolution. Alfonso did not share his father and brother Rodolfo's political views, but was nonetheless forced to leave the country for his own safety. He departed for Paris in August 1913 to work for the Mexican Legation, but tenure there was short-lived, as a change of Government in Mexico brought in a regime less forgiving of his family's political legacy. With few prospects in Paris and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, he and his family moved to Madrid, where he made a precarious living as a journalist and researcher until 1920 when, with another change of regime in Mexico, he was re-admitted to the Mexican Legation. That there is a link between the play and Reyes' traumatic life experiences is generally accepted and attributed to the author's own comments in his *Commentary on Ifigenia cruel*, the paratext that accompanied the work on its publication in 1924: 'La Ifigenia, además, encubre una experiencia propia. Usando del escaso don que nos fue concedido, en el compás de nuestras fuerzas, intentamos emanciparnos de la angustia que tal experiencia nos dejó, proyectándola sobre el cielo artístico, descargándola en un coloquio de sombras' (Reyes 1959: 354), ['My Iphigenia also veils a personal experience. Using the few gifts I have, and to the best of my ability, I have tried to free myself from the anguish this experience left with me, projecting it onto artistic skies, venting it in a colloquium of shadows'].² Given its political backdrop, it is scarcely surprising that the plot of *Ifigenia cruel* invites multiple political analogies: Orestes is frequently read as representing the *ancient regime* of pre-Revolutionary Mexican politics and those, like Alfonso's brother Rodolfo, who promoted a return to a system where power was concentrated in the hands of a small, political elite (Teja 2004: 256-266). This reading is shared by Julia Faesler, director of the 2014 production for the Teatro Nacional Mexicano:³

Orestes también es en cierto sentido una figura ficticia, es una víctima, es un personaje que ha sido utilizado por el poder para crear una figura que en realidad no existe. Es perdonado por asesinar a su madre por todas las instancias conservadoras del poder porque necesitan que el varón asuma el poder. En ese sentido me parece muy genial la obra de Reyes que rehusa jugar ese papel de revalidación política. (Faesler 2017)

[In a sense, Orestes is also a victim, a character used by the forces of power to create a figure that has no reality. He is forgiven for murdering his mother by every conservative instance of power because they need a male successor to assume that power. In this respect I think it's wonderful that Reyes' play refuses to play that part of political validation.]

Overall, it is in the representation of power and those who hold it, that Reyes' text differs most radically from previous dramatizations of the myth. This is no accident. He had, after all, witnessed at first hand reversals of power with tragic consequences. Few of the characters in his version of the myth wield the degree or kind of power that prior versions would lead us to expect. For example, Thoas, the King of Tauris, in previous dramatizations is presented as a tyrannical 'barbarian', while Reyes' Thoas is a gentle and forgiving ruler. His Orestes believes he need only tell Iphigenia who he is and that she will comply with his authority, accompany him back to Greece to facilitate the political rehabilitation of the House of Atreus. But Reyes' Iphigenia refuses to leave Tauris or return to Greece. Her character, too, reaches beyond the audiences' expectations established by previous dramatizations of the myth. Instead, she attempts to take control of her destiny at the end of the play; she chooses to stay in the service of the goddess Artemis in Tauris, rather than return to Greece to serve what she now sees as her monstrous lineage its murderous

history of sacrifice and revenge. When Iphigenia refuses to comply with Orestes she disrupts many narrative and mythical norms, not least their patriarchal structures and plots. Her decision to reject the destiny devised for her by Orestes and Apollo is presented as a chance for freedom by the Chorus: ‘escoge el nombre que te guste/ y llámate a ti misma como quieras:/ ya abriste pausa a los destinos, donde/ brinca la fuente de la libertad’ (Reyes 1959: 349), [‘choose whatever name you wish,/ and call yourself what you want:/ you have made the course of destiny pause/ where the source of your freedom trickles forth’] and has been construed by some critics as an assertion of her individual will (Arenas Monreal 2004:184-221; Edith Hall 2013: 275-281). Even in the light of such positive interpretations, however, her decision to stay in Tauris at the end of the play, and to continue to administer the rite of human sacrifice to Artemis, is a far cry from the moving and harmonious conclusions of either Euripides’ or Goethe’s versions, which are characterised by forgiveness and reconciliation. Reyes’ troubling deviation from the enshrined narrative of the myth has been written about from many scholarly angles: mythical, ethical, political and biographical. What is missing in relation to this aspect of the play, as in all others, is an analysis of the challenges it presents for performance.

The presence of so many layers of narrative - mythical, historical and biographical - make enormous demands of the director, cast and audience. Many mythical narratives are told simultaneously. For example, Act V has to transmit not only the events at Aulis prior to Iphigenia’s ‘sacrifice’, but also the subsequent cycle of murder and revenge that has plagued the House of Atreus. Moreover, Orestes’ Theogony (also in Act V) gives an account of an even longer mythical genealogy going back to Tantalus. Another example of layered mythical narrative is visible in the dialogue between Iphigenia, (Artemis’s priestess, charged to sacrifice intruders), and Orestes, her captive in Act III. On one level, we hear Iphigenia’s defence of Artemis’ Taurian cult of human sacrifice, and Orestes’ rebuttal. On another, Reyes uses the dialogue to invoke the long rhetorical tradition of ‘the conflict between Greeks and Barbarians’,

and at the same time, to convey a mythical narrative of the origins of the gods (Reyes 1959: 314). In addition to this crowding of mythical narratives, the director must negotiate the many political and personal narratives that surround the text, and confront difficult decisions: should (s)he attempt to incorporate, or at least acknowledge, all these narratives? If some are to be privileged or discarded, which should they be? Should contextualising political and or biographical narratives, if not explicit in the text, be communicated by a stage production? And if so, how? At this point, it is useful to examine the strategies used by Juliana Faesler, the director of the 2014 production of *Ifigenia cruel* for the Mexican National Theatre Company. Faesler makes the point that the multiplicity of stories at work either explicitly or implicitly in the text, makes *Ifigenia cruel* ‘una obra llena de analogías y fantasmas. Las posibilidades analógicas son eternas’, [‘a play full of analogies and ghosts. The possibilities for analogy are endless’]. Her own response to these possibilities in approaching the text was uncompromising:

La intención de la puesta en escena era sí arrastrar la obra al contexto, forzar a Reyes a decir lo que quería decir, que era su profunda tristeza y decepción y melancolía por un posible desarrollo de la historia que no fue lo que él esperaba en ningún sentido. Agarramos el texto y lo desviamos, lo deslizamos hacia un discurso muy directo a la República mexicana y a todos los mexicanos. (Faesler 2017)

[The intention of this production was to drag the play to its context, forcing Reyes to say what he wanted to say, which was his profound grief and disappointment and sadness at a possible development in history which had not turned out the way he expected in any sense. We seized the text and directed it towards a very direct discourse with the Mexican Republic and all Mexicans.]

Her interpretation of the relationship of the play to its political backdrop could not be clearer. In the absence of an explicit exposition of this relationship by the author, she saw her role as having to ‘drag’ the play to its historical context and her strategies for doing so were through visual media such as documentary footage, set design and costume. The production opened with a nine-minute projection onto a screen above the set, of photographic images of the historical figures involved in the 1913 ‘Decena Trágica’, as well as film footage of the bombardment and destruction of Mexico City’s historic centre. These images are accompanied by a voice-over which narrates the principal events of those momentous ten days. The voiceover is accompanied by recordings of popular songs about the events, and it is through the lyrics of just such a song that we learn of General Reyes’ death. After seven and a half minutes the voiceover and recorded songs are replaced by a live score played by musicians present on stage, visibly located behind the set.⁴ The score swells to become cacophonous, in keeping with the grim events projected, as the images fade and lights come up on the set. After a total of nine minutes, Iphigenia utters the first words of the play.

The director’s decision to insert such extensive documentary elements before the play commences is telling. It signals immediately to the audience a connection between the play and the events that led to the death of Reyes’ father and his subsequent exile, and imparts the relevant historical information to explain that connection. Moreover, the fact that these images and narrative open the production gives a prominence to historical and political context that will precondition the audience’s response, facilitating a ‘very direct discourse with the Mexican Republic and with all Mexicans’ that would be difficult to achieve through Reyes’ text alone. During our dialogue, Faesler also stated that the use of real footage helped to ‘recuperar la memoria coporeal’ [‘restore physical memory’], an important point on two levels. Firstly, the physical evidence of individual and collective death on the screen may help connect the audience to the protagonist’s past trauma and ongoing part in the collective tragedy of the

House of Atreus. Secondly, it highlights the theme of memory which is so central to the play (Shaughnessy 2015: 57-86). It is Iphigenia's recovery of her memory that will lead her to reject her family and homeland. Arguably, the use of 'physical memory' in the form of images of the events of February 1913 encourages the audience to reflect on the history of the Mexican Republic and its current situation over a century later. It also facilitates the director's political reading of the play, a reading emphasized through set design and costume. The pieces of furniture placed among the ruins on the set are early twentieth century in style, as are the costumes. The character of King Thoas bears a strong physical resemblance to the assassinated President Francisco Maduro, both physically and in his costume. In this manner, the visual aspects of production reinforce the political differences between Thoas (benign ruler) and Orestes (self-absorbed elitist) already noted. While the multi-layered narrative of the plot creates, in Faesler's words, 'endless possibilities' for historical and political analogies, the visual devices employed in the 2014 production are designed to focus the attention of the audience on analogies that express the director's view that the play contains an implicit statement by Reyes on the impact of 1913 on the course of Mexican democracy: 'su profunda tristeza y decepción y melancolía por un posible desarrollo de la historia que no fue lo que él esperaba en ningún sentido. Sabemos que nuestro querido y adorado amigo Reyes estaba super-amargado', ['his deep sadness and disappointment about the possible development in Mexican history that did not come to pass. We know that our beloved and adored Reyes was very bitter about it.'] She was determined to make this view explicit, even if she had to 'drag it to its context', or drag its historical context onto the stage, with the 'physical memory' of original footage.

Poetry and Pace

Faesler's use of visual media arguably helps the audience to negotiate the resonant narratives of *Ifigenia cruel*. But this was just one of the many challenges she faced in the process of staging the play. Another problem she outlined was the poetic nature of the text: the challenges of communicating to the audience so many narratives containing so much information in poetic dialogue, are significant. Reyes himself acknowledged this in his *Commentary*, quoting Paul Valéry: 'Ciertamente es que, en los versos, todo lo que es necesario decir, casi es imposible decirlo bien' (Reyes 1959: 359) ['What is certain, in verse, is that everything that needs to be said, is impossible to say well.']. Valéry's words suggest an admission of impossibility: that there is present in *Ifigenia cruel* a critical weight of narrative that cannot be borne or communicated by poetic dialogue; that this represents a regrettable but inevitable loss in the quest for balance between the poetic and dramatic demands of the text. It is significant that Reyes subtitled the work 'Un poema dramático', which raises the possibility that he privileged the poetic aspects of the work over the dramatic. (It is interesting to note that in the paratexts to the play, he provides lengthy and detailed commentary on how he has employed the theatrical conventions of Greek tragedy, while his comments on the poetry of the text are comparatively brief.) Faesler's experience was that the play's compressed, poetic language and extensive use of imagery were not easily penetrated or conveyed physically by the cast:

El público mexicano en general no puede digerir semejante peso de palabras y de significados ocultos y de juegos personales. A veces es incomprendible, es un texto que nos tomó muchísimo tiempo y tomó muchísimo tiempo entenderlo, racionalizarlo, hacerlo cuerpo con los actores. Pero es una de esas experiencias donde el público se siente increíblemente agredido por un texto que no puede entender. (Faesler 2017)

The Mexican public in general cannot digest such a weight of words and hidden meanings and personal inferences. At times it's impenetrable: we took a lot of time with the actors trying to understand it, rationalise it, find physical expression for it. It's one of those experiences where the public feels affronted by a text it cannot understand.

What is fascinating here, is the apparent disconnect between the director and cast's experience of the text, and the author's. This is what Reyes has to say on the poetry of *Ifigenia cruel*:

Y nos sedujo la idea de tratar el asunto con cierta escasez verbal y en un solo estilo de metáforas. Una obsesión por determinadas palabras muy concretas podía hacer de brújula estética: mano, brazo, fuerza, oro, piedra, sangre, leche; vocabulario de entrañas, verbos de estallido y agitación, adjetivos de dureza; reiteración de ciertos términos que un oído habituado percibirá fácilmente. (Reyes 1959:359)

I was seduced by the idea of treating the subject with a kind of verbal austerity, using just one style of metaphor. An obsession with specific, predetermined words would provide an aesthetic compass: hand, arm, foot, gold, stone, blood, milk; words for entrails, verbs of eruption and agitation, harsh adjectives; a reiteration of certain terms easily perceived by the accustomed ear.

Everything that Reyes claims for the play's poetry is borne out by the text: the conscious use of abrasive verbs and adjectives; the repetition of key words and metaphors that provides a textual coherence and unity. However, his expectation that the repetition of certain terms would be 'easily perceived by the accustomed ear' tells us something about his expectations of his audience. This kind of 'accustomed ear' is more likely to have been trained in poetry readings

than in the theatre. It is not a training that most theatre goers would have experienced in the 1920s, or experience today. Reyes' confidence in the ability of the poetry to provide an 'aesthetic compass' for the audience is probably misplaced. In the case of a published collection of poems, the repetition of key words, digested at leisure and repeatedly by the reader, can provide precisely such a compass. However, in the realm of performance, where there is so much for the audience to absorb simultaneously in the moment - story, character, setting, dialogue - not every poetic device will register or resonate fully.

The challenge to 'find physical expression' for the poetry of *Ifigenia cruel* was one that Faesler alluded to often in our correspondence and dialogue. It emerged again when I posed a question regarding the structure of the play. I suspected that the first two Acts, which precede the arrival of Orestes and Pylades, had probably been the most difficult to stage. The fact that there is no obvious plot development in either act potentially renders them static. My impressions were confirmed by Faesler's response:

La primera parte era la más difícil. Era muy difícil hacer cuerpo con el texto. Tuvimos que elegir entre enfocar exclusivamente en el sentido y la sonoridad de las palabras, o incluir movimiento. No había cambios de ritmo; la única variedad que había era en los estados anímicos de los personajes. (Faesler 2017)

The opening section of the play was the most difficult. It was very difficult to find physical expression for the text. We had to choose between focusing solely on the meaning and sound of the words or including movement. There was no variety of pace; the only variety was in the characters' state of mind and emotional condition.

This absence of physical action is in keeping with the nature of Greek tragedy, where the progression of plot is achieved more through internal, emotional movement and poetic progression. However, it does pose a challenge in terms of seizing the audience's attention in the first act and, mostly importantly, holding onto it in the second, while awaiting Orestes' arrival and the commencement of the lengthy process of *anagnorisis* that dominates Acts III, IV and V. Again, Reyes' comments are telling. He acknowledges that the main function of the first act is to introduce Iphigenia's situation - supernaturally transported by Artemis to Tauris but with no memory of the 'sacrifice' of Aulis. The audience is also introduced to her emotional state, her feelings of isolation, not knowing who she is, only that she is different from the Chorus of Taurian women who reveal her role as the goddess' priestess and the nature of her sacrificial duties. Although there is much for the audience to absorb here, Reyes' decision to follow with a second act that functions as a conscious pause, is highly questionable in dramatic terms, and runs the risk of losing momentum: 'El segundo tiempo es un compás de reposo, que intenta aliviarnos de las abstracciones del primer tiempo recurriendo a la visualidad y al color' (Reyes 1959: 314), ' ['The second act, in terms of pace, represents a rest, and is meant to give relief from the abstraction of the first act by taking recourse in the visual and in colour]. Again we see in Reyes' comments a blurring or unawareness of the differences between poetry and stage performance. Imagery that is both visual and full of colour abounds in the poetry of Act II, but the auditory perception of these images does not have the immediacy of visual representation; they are more difficult for the audience to absorb and process. One of the strategies Faesler used to alleviate the danger that the public could feel 'affronted' by such a densely poetic text that 'it cannot understand' in the moment of performance, was in the use of props: 'Hay aparatos para comunicar con el mundo exterior pero sirven para poco: hay grabadoras, que de alguna manera han grabado la historia y el pasado pero que Ifigenia no puede descifrar', ['There are gadgets for communicating with the outside world but they don't

help: there are tape recorders that have somehow recorded history but Iphigenia can't decipher them'] (Faesler 2017). The use of these gadgets mirrors the audience's feelings of helplessness at their inability to process an excess of poetry and information, and attempts to make of it a shared experience with the protagonist.

Other problems of pacing arise throughout the text. Act III opens with dialogue between Orestes and Iphigenia and initiates the process of *anagnorisis*, but Reyes slows down the pace at the end of the act, and justifies this as being necessary so that the situation can accumulate its full potential of pathos. Furthermore, he deploys his knowledge of the conventions of Greek oratory to emphasise the self-regard inherent in Orestes' insistence on the nobility of his lineage, but while Reyes' use of pedantry may serve the characterisation, it also represents a challenge to the retention of the audience's attention. By Act IV the audience is aware that Orestes and Iphigenia are siblings, and await Iphigenia's double realisation of her brother's identity and her own. As Act V begins, Reyes again delays the moment of revelation with Orestes' Theogony, his invocation of myths of the genealogy of the gods, the story of the curse of Tantalus, Agamemnon's death at the hands of Clytemnestra and her death at his own hands. By his own admission it is 'pesado y voluminoso', ['long and tedious'] (Reyes 1959: 315). It seems fair to conclude at this point that his enthusiasm for Greek poetic forms eclipses the need to sustain momentum in a staged performance.

It is worth noting that if in this case Reyes' veneration for Greek poetic tradition introduces problems of pacing, in other aspects of the play his willingness to break with convention contributes greatly to dramatic and emotional impact. For example, the key process of recognition in *Ifigenia cruel* is more psychologically complex than required by the conventions of Greek tragedy, and indicates a desire for deep emotional engagement with the audience. Iphigenia's loss and recovery of memory amplify the emotional impact of *anagnorisis*. In previous dramatizations of the myth, she discovers only the identity of her

brother. Here, she also recovers her own identity and her past through the traumatic memories of Aulis. The affective impact of these revelations is further heightened on stage as Iphigenia takes up the narration of those events from Orestes and in doing so, re-lives and recounts the trauma of the past for the audience in the present.

The scene demonstrates Reyes' ability to inspire a powerful emotional response in his audience. However, this ability of the play to provoke deep levels of emotional engagement is not reflected in his plethora of commentaries about it. In his *Commentary*, Reyes draws on his earlier essay on Greek tragedy, 'Las tres Electras del teatro ateniense' ['The Three Electras of Athenian Theatre'].⁵ Barrenechea neatly summarises the view expressed there by Reyes, that 'the purpose of tragedy' was not the 'expression of a sympathetic connection between human and world' but rather 'the portrayal of those cosmic, metaphysical forces that transcend the human'; that 'destiny, divine influence, [and the] compensation of natural forces' combined to constitute the rather vague category of 'universal tragedy'; and that ultimately, Greek tragedy was for Reyes a 'cosmic dialogue' between these forces, its characters 'mere shadows'. (Barrenechea 2012: 13-14). He points out that this understanding of Greek tragedy, as delineated in 'Las Tres Electras', is not born out by Reyes' own play, where the protagonist's actions clearly step outside what has been divinely ordained. He also notes the qualifications inserted into Reyes' later *Commentary* - that Greek tragedy is also 'attentive to the human element' and observes the tension between Reyes' stated view of 'universal tragedy' and the 'individual freedom' that underlies the play's ending (14). Barrenechea's observations can be extended to include the challenges to staging *Ifigenia cruel*. Given that Reyes saw his play as part of a tradition that was less concerned with building connections between the individual and their surrounding world than with the concepts of destiny and divine influence, it is little wonder that Faesler felt she had to 'drag' the play to its historical context. However, as Barrenechea also points out, Reyes' qualification of his earlier analysis of Greek tragedy

suggests a desire to open up more space in his definition for emotional engagement (14). It suggests, too, that he was aware of the power of his own play to emotionally ‘submerge’ its audience in the cruelty of Iphigenia’s situation (Reyes 1959: 353). This article argues that one of the greatest obstacles to staging *Ifigenia cruel* is its author’s ambivalence around this very power, an ambivalence partly drawn from his choice of Greek tragedy as his chosen vehicle, and partly from the political and personal circumstances in which it was written.

Myth and Concealment

When it comes to the embodiment and expression of strong emotions there is a marked ‘push-pull’ dynamic at work within this play, which stems from its relationship to Reyes’ ongoing grief at his father’s death. There is the impulse to express this loss, and also the very human, but problematic need to have it recognized by others. Problematic, because he could not publicly grieve the loss of his father without being allied in public opinion with his brother Rodolfo’s ongoing public opposition to the Post-Revolutionary Mexican State; a position he fundamentally opposed (Garciadiego 2009: 52-3, 117). He therefore did not publish any comment on his father’s death in his lifetime (Arenas Monreal 2004: 251-277).

Mythical narrative allowed the grieving author to overcome this apparently insurmountable conflict of personal and public spheres; in Faesler’s words, ‘la mitología le ofrece un desahogo’, [‘mythology offers him a release’]. Symbolically rich, with the potential for multiple interpretations, myth allowed Reyes to simultaneously reveal and conceal; it let him explore his relationship to a traumatic past in the safety of metaphor and analogy where no single interpretation was definitive. *Ifigenia cruel* is therefore able to transmit deep feelings of loss while disguising the personal nature of this loss in layers of mythical narrative. Looking back on his essay, ‘Las Tres Electras’ [‘The Three Electras’] it appears that the role of concealment, secrecy or with-holding was essential to Reyes’ conception of characterization

from an early stage in his writing career. He is critical of Sophocles' protagonist on the grounds that she is 'sin conflicto interior, y tan fácil en su problema trágico que basta seguir sus discursos para poder representársela', ['devoid of internal conflict, so all that is required to represent her on stage is to follow her lines']. It is an intriguing comment that suggests a dislike on Reyes' part for fully revealed characters, or characters who are fully known to themselves. He is equally critical of Sophocles' Philoctetes because he lacks a 'secreto espiritual' ['spiritual secret'] (Reyes 1955: 23-24). The question of temperament is also significant in this regard: Reyes was a private man, not inclined to seek controversy or polemics. Controlled outcomes, however, are not always possible, whether emotional or artistic. This is especially true for victims of political violence, and Reyes was certainly not in control of his life circumstances when writing *Ifigenia cruel* in Spain in 1922-3, with his eventual repatriation dependent on his relationship to the Mexican Government. Perhaps the prolonged precariousness he experienced after the Decena Trágica contributed to his rather obsessive concern with controlling perceptions of his work, a case in point being the book-ending of *Ifigenia cruel* with his *Commentary and Brief Note*.

One of the attractions of Greek tragedy for Reyes was the openness of its mythical narratives. His *Ifigenia cruel* represents another phase in a complex continuum of dramatizations of a myth that dates back to Euripides; its success in this respect relies on the genre's openness to adaptation and the author's participation in the evolution of received narratives. Despite this, the paratexts seem to wish to reduce the play to a sum of the parts of its use of the dramatic conventions of tragedy. These two inclinations are not incompatible, but they do leave the reader with the sense of a tension between emotional release and expansion in the play's narrative innovations, and the containment in the paratexts' emphasis on adherence to form and convention. This tension will be even more pronounced for a theatre audience experiencing a play that declares itself to be at one with the form and world view of

Greek tragedy, but whose ending strays beyond the declared parameters of the genre. It could be argued that in fact, these paratexts demonstrate Reyes' desire to control reader response. Nothing, however, in these very erudite documents can influence the audience's reception of the play in a live performance.

Audience Reception and Anti-theatricality

Despite its subtitle, 'Un poema trágico'[A Tragic Poem], and Reyes' references to *Ifigenia cruel* as 'the poem' in his paratexts, there is no evidence that he regarded it as 'teatro para leer', a text to be read rather than performed. In his *Stage Fright. Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama*, Martin Puchner casts light on patterns of 'resistance' to theatre, at times conscious, at times unconscious, within theatre practice of the period. He regards it as a complex form of resistance that also implies a degree of dependency: 'The best way to characterize the constitutive anti-theatrical dynamic within modernism is as a form of resistance [...] The act of resistance is often largely determined by that which is being resisted' (2002: 2). Puchner's definition captures the dilemma of resistance underlying *Ifigenia cruel*. Reyes depends on his chosen genre of Greek tragedy for emotional depth and the public forum of theatre to express both the personal loss of his father and the national loss of political opportunity in 1913. However, the symbolic potential of myth also allows him to 'resist' and conceal those sources of grief, and the uncompromisingly poetic nature of the text creates, in the words of Faesler, 'una muralla entre el público y el espectáculo', ['a wall' between the audience and performance]. Puchner continues, 'The resistance registered in the prefix 'anti' does not describe a place outside the horizon of the theatre, but a variety of attitudes through which the theatre is being kept at arm's length' (2002: 2).

This is, in part, due to Reyes' ambivalent relationship to theatre's status as the most public of art forms. He shared the modernist sensibility of the individual artist who shies from

the public sphere; theatre, in contrast, depends on collaboration with commercial realities, and necessarily entails 'a more direct relation to the social and public spheres' (Puchner 2002: 9). As we have seen, this kind of 'direct relation' is not something Reyes was temperamentally inclined to seek. What is more, Puchner argues, 'Both the insistence on complexity and the types of reception necessitated by it are responses to the fear that theatre would actually provide a forum in which the constitution of public opinion might take place' (10). Herein lies the nub of Puchner's understanding of anti-theatricalism in Modernist theatre: a wariness of collective, spontaneous audience reception, the fear of not being able to control it, or of being publicly associated with it. In the 1920s it would have been potentially disadvantageous for Reyes to publicly identify himself with any political position in relation to the Mexican State; there were fundamental political and philosophical differences between what Robert Conn has described as Reyes' 'utopic intellectual and artistic community' and 'the state-pedagogic of initiatives and muralism of the 1920s and 1930s and he had no desire to contribute to a public airing of these, or of political differences (Conn 2002: 24). Given his family history, he had good reason to be suspicious of populism and to avoid participation in 'the constitution of public opinion' he had no control over. The controlled 'types of reception' Puchner alludes to are self-selecting or invited audiences who were attracted to the complexity of modernist writing. From the perspective of the modernist writer, the advantage of such an audience was that they experienced theatre in staged readings, small spaces, settings that were essentially more private than public, and therefore more receptive to authorial control: 'The limiting and control of the audience is something modern drama learned from the closet drama, which often accepted as a kind of compromise, a small coterie audience attending a dramatic reading or even a chamber staging'. It could be argued that Reyes' rather high-brow choice of subject matter, genre and poetic style evidence the pre-selection of a highly educated audience. Anti-theatrical tendencies are discernible in his conscious or unconscious attempts to control the collective

reception of the play in the paratexts that accompany it; but while this strategy may influence reader response, ‘a control over the external circumstances of reception is impossible to implement in the theatre’ (10).

Conclusion

Puchner’s analysis helps to explain why a text such as *Ifignenia cruel* has not received more attention in the field of Theatre and Performance Studies, which, since the early twentieth century, has had a marked tendency to ‘celebrate avant garde theatricalism’ while ignoring the more literary sub-genre of poetic drama. Conversely, studies in literary Modernism ‘perpetuate modernist anti-theatricalisms through a critical erasure of the category of theatre’ (8). Consequently, many fine examples of poetic and/or closet drama have fallen between these two critical stools. Like Yeats’ theatre, Reyes’ *Ifignenia cruel* has been regarded as poetic literature that has ‘nothing to do with the theatre’, a position that denies the author’s very dependency on his chosen genre of Greek tragedy, which cannot be artificially separated from the public forum of theatre. (Puchner 2002: 8).

Puchner’s analysis also helps explain why the play has not been performed more often: it is in his anti-theatrical tendencies that we encounter a fundamental incompatibility between Reyes’ ambitions for his play and those of the present-day director. The rise of the so-called Director’s Theatre was ‘anathema to the anti-theatrical modernists’ because it necessitated a loss of authorial control (10). Juliana Faesler’s overt socio-political approach to Reyes’ text in 2014, then, not only had to tackle ‘resistance’ in the form of textual challenges such as multi-layered narratives and poetry; the director was also constantly pulling against the imprint of Reyes’ anti-theatricalism, his wariness of theatre as the most public of art forms, of being seen to make a political statement or as contributing in any way to public opinion. It is little wonder, then, that she felt she had to ‘drag’ the play to its specific historical context: the events of the

1913 Decena Trágica, the personal trauma they brought for the author, and the collective trauma they brought for Mexico. Her use of visual, documentary evidence of the personal and national traumas of 1913 makes explicit some of the historical analogies implicit in Reyes' version of the Iphigenia myth; it gives history the visual and political immediacy of 'physical memory'.

Critical responses to the 2014 production have been difficult to gage. Many press reviews depended on interviews with Alicia Reyes (Alfonso Reyes' grand-daughter and Director of the Capilla Alfonsina where his archives are housed), with Luis de Tavira, Artistic Director of the National Theatre, director Juliana Faesler and/or members of the cast; they can read more like previews than reviews of an actual production.⁶ The iconic Bellas Artes Theatre is an expensive venue; this will have limited the profile of the audience with access to the production. The play itself is challenging and the director's interpretation pushed a political interpretation in an iconic, national venue with a potentially conservative audience; the director's decision to 'drag' the play to its historical context may not have been to everyone's taste. Even with the intervention of Faesler's compensating strategies such as historical footage and a live musical accompaniment, at least one reviewer highlighted the difficulty presented by the play for the average theatre goer.⁷ In this context, the fact that the 2014 production gave a central role to the physical presence of musicians and their commissioned score reflects an understanding on the director's part that faced with Reyes' challenging text, the modern audience would need the extra dimension of soundscape to help break down the 'wall' of its own potential resistance.

It is no coincidence that some of the features of Greek tragedy that most attracted Reyes could be viewed as potentially 'anti-theatrical' in Puchner's terms: a preference for characters not fully revealed to themselves or to the audience; the importance of ambiguity in the malleability of mythical narrative; the use of highly codified poetic language. All these aspects

potentially impose a distancing of characters from themselves, from other characters and from the audience. While this over-arching effect can be justified on the grounds that it reflects the emotional and spiritual isolation of the protagonist throughout the play, it exemplifies yet again the tensions generated within Reyes' *Ifigenia cruel*, a play with the potential to both inspire a deep emotional response in the audience and to hold them at arm's length; tensions that may not be immediately obvious in the solitary experience of reading, but are necessarily thrown into sharp relief in the process of staging.

¹ The play was first read publicly in Paris on 2 December 1925, with musical interludes on the Bolivian pipes (queñas) in the home of the writer, Gonzalo Zaldumbide, at that time Ambassador for Ecuador in the French capital. Subsequent mainstream productions are as follows: on 29-30 August and 1-2 September 1934, the Teatro de Orientación, sponsored by the Secretaría de Educación Pública de México, Departamento de Bellas Artes, staged the play in the Hidalgo Theatre, Mexico City, directed by Celestino Gorostiza. In Madrid on 12 April 1958, the Ensayo Hispanoamericano Theatre staged *Ifigenia cruel*, directed by Aitor de Goiricelaya. As part of a National Homage to Alfonso Reyes, in November 1981 in the Bellas Artes Theatre, Mexico City, directed by Héctor Azar. In November 1989 in Lima, Perú, it was staged by the Cuatrotablas company, directed by Mario Delgado Vásquez. Most recently, in April 2014 in the Jiménez Rueda Theatre and June 2014 in the Bellas Artes Theatre, Mexico City, it was produced by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro, [Mexican National Theatre Company] in collaboration with Centro de Producción de Música Contemporánea [Centre for the Production of Contemporary Music], directed by Juliana Faesler (Assistant Director Clarissa Malheiros).

² In the absence of a complete published translation, all translations of the text and of secondary sources written in Spanish are my own.

³ The National Theatre of Mexico provided me with a copy of their DVD of the 2014 production of *Ifigenia cruel*. Between January and February 2017, I entered into a dialogue with the director, Juliana Faesler, emailing questions about her interpretation and choice of strategies for the production. She responded by sending detailed oral responses and reflections in sound files. In February 2017 we shared a lengthy Skype conversation with her Assistant Director Clarissa Malheiros.

⁴ According to Faesler the presence of CEPROMUSIC musicians on stage represented a kind of Chorus, and the score, played throughout the entire play, served two functions: it reflected ‘the universe of sound’ in the poetry of Reyes’ text, and helped communicate the emotional content of the play.

⁵ Reyes, ‘Las tres Electras del teatro ateniense’ in *Obras completas* vol. I (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1955), pp.15-48.

⁶ See, for example, Victor García Esquivel, in CRONICA.com.mx 12 abril, 2014.
<http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2014/827883.html> Accessed 12 July 2017.

⁷ See Roberto Marmolejo, CHILANGO junio 2014
<http://www.chilango.com/agenda/evento/ifigenia-cruel/> Accessed 16 January 2017.

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