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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>&quot;Violence and the Sacred&quot;: sacrifice, scapegoating and social conflict in Alfonso Reyes Ifigenia cruel</th>
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‘Violence and the Sacred’: Sacrifice, Scapegoating and Social Conflict in Alfonso Reyes’ *Ifigenia cruel*.

This article presents a reading of Alfonso Reyes’ *Ifigenia cruel* informed by René Girard’s theories of ‘mimetic violence’ and ‘the scapegoating effect’. It seeks to foster interest in the complex relationship between the play and the Mexican political context at the time of its composition, by examining both in the light of Girard’s understanding of social conflict and sacrifice. It identifies Reyes’ use of sacrificial metaphor as part of a complex continuum that includes Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Where older versions of the myth end with deliverance for the heroine, however, Reyes’ text ends on a darker note. It is argued that *Ifigenia cruel* should not be read as a text that promotes the triumph of peace through the heroine’s rejection of her past, but rather as one where self-sacrifice and the shadow of scapegoating, as understood by Girard, reflect a Mexico racked by continuing violence.

*Sacrifice contains an element of mystery. And if the pieties of classical humanists lull our curiosity to sleep, the company of the ancient authors keeps it alert.*

René Girard

The nature of sacrifice and its relationship to both the social and the sacred is central to Alfonso Reyes’ *Ifigenia cruel* (Cruel Iphigenia). This is especially true of the practice of human sacrifice by its protagonist. Reyes’ plot bears important similarities to that of Euripides’

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2Reyes (1959: 317-349). I will refer to the Spanish title throughout this article. In the absence of an edition with line references, page references are provided.
Iphigenia in Tauris, where Iphigenia has been saved from sacrifice in Aulis by the intervention of Artemis and supernaturally transported to Tauris, where she serves as her priestess. However, there are also important differences. In a highly original departure from the narrative conventions of the myth, Reyes’ Iphigenia has lost all memory of her former life in Greece and the events that led up to her life on Tauris. This device allows him to create a psychologically troubled protagonist with a problematic relationship to her past. In previous versions of the myth, Iphigenia in Tauris is represented as the very embodiment of forgiveness.\(^3\) She yearns for reunification with family and homeland and eventually escapes with her shipwrecked brother, Orestes. In contrast with Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris, or Goethe’s Iphigenie, there is little sense of redemption or restoration at the close of Ifigenia cruel; there will be no reconciliation between the protagonist and her family, as the author chooses to subvert the audience’s expectations of a redemptive conclusion. Rather than return to Mycenae with Orestes, this Iphigenia opts to remain in Tauris, to sacrifice her own future and continue to make human sacrifices to Artemis.

A perceptible pattern has emerged in critical responses to the play, as the way in which critics engage with the question of human sacrifice has largely determined their responses to it, and whether they read its conclusion in positive or negative terms. Most readings of the ending have been positive, a trend possibly initiated by Reyes himself in his Comentario a la Ifigenia cruel, one of the paratexts published by the author along with the play: ‘She rises above the vendetta of Mycenae, grasps the moment when destiny hesitates, and choosing emancipation, refuses to return to her homeland’ (1959: 358).\(^4\) Examples of

\(^3\) See Hall on Goethe’s Iphigenie (2013: 210-211).

\(^4\) A fragment of the text, translated by Dick Gerdes, has been published in Martínez (ed.) 2009: 464-467. In the absence of a complete English version, all translations of the text and of secondary sources written in Spanish are my own.
more recent positive readings are those of Rogelio Arenas⁵ and Edith Hall,⁶ whereas Octavio Paz,⁷ Francisco Barrenechea⁸ and Ana María Teja⁹ problematize the issue. Barrenechea points out that the seeming paradox of Iphigenia’s dual sacrificial roles - sacrificial victim in Aulis turned sacrificing priestess in Tauris – needs to be read through the presence of two kinds of violence in the text, the human and the sacred. He also acknowledges Reyes’ understanding of tragedy as a pathway to participation by the individual in a wider, cosmic order (7). This article aims to stimulate further discussion of the role of sacrifice in Ifigenia cruel: firstly by examining René Girard’s theories on violence, scapegoating and sacrifice, and secondly, by considering the political context of post-revolutionary Mexico and how this may have impacted on Reyes’ approach to these aspects of human behaviour in the early 1920s when writing the play.¹⁰

While Ifigenia cruel shares its setting and narrative premise with Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris, the dynamics of sacrifice that drive the characterisation and dénouement of the play have more in common with the Iphigenia in Aulis.¹¹ Barrenechea reminds us that two versions of the sacrifice of Iphigenia pre-existed Euripides’ tragedies: one where Iphigenia is sacrificed at Aulis,

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¹⁰ Reyes cites the composition of the initial draft of Ifigenia cruel as between August and September 1923, in his ‘Historia documental de mis libros’, (Reyes 1990: 330-331). However, Arenas Monreal notes the date December 1922 on a manuscript of the play (2004: 126), and references to a completed draft in his letter to José M. Chacón y Calvo in November 1922 (2004:118).
¹¹ Although not a Classicist by training, Reyes devoted much of his early scholarly life to the study of Hellenism, and in 1908 wrote an essay on ‘Las tres Electras del teatro ateniense’, included in his Cuestiones estéticas (Reyes 1955: 15-48).
and another, where Artemis intervenes at the last moment, substituting a deer for the girl, and transports her to Tauris. He concludes that in its many representations and interpretations, ‘The Aulis version can definitely exist without Tauris’. In other words, the sacrifice in Aulis can stand alone as a self-contained narrative, whereas ‘Tauris is impossible without Aulis; the sacrifice is its invariable precondition’, and the *Iphigenia in Tauris* is already ‘foreshadowed at the very end of his *Iphigenia in Aulis*’ (Barrenechea 2012: 8). Hall notes a marked dependence in Reyes’ play too, observing that in the fifth Act he ‘introduces a series of several speeches in which Iphigenia uses material from *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and ‘a version of her mother Clytemnestra’s great appeal to Agamemnon’ (2013: 280). Given this degree of indebtedness, it is worth examining where and how the dynamics of scapegoating and sacrifice can be seen at work in this key underlying text, Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*, before considering the implications of Girard’s work for Reyes’ *Ifigenia cruel*.

*Mimetic Rivalry in Aulis*

Girard’s seminal work on violence, scapegoating and sacrifice can help us to mine the many psychological and political layers that characterize Reyes’ reworking of the myth. Much of his theory on the nature of human violence is based on his rejection of commonly-held beliefs that either aggression or scarcity are its principal motivators. Instead, he posits ‘a theory of conflict based primarily on appropriative mimicry’ and what he defines as ‘mimetic rivalry’. In other words, because of the human tendency to want what others desire or have (‘mimetic desire’), two individuals desiring the same object or status enter into a relationship of rivalry. Moreover, this rivalry becomes reciprocal:

If the tendency to imitate appropriation is present on both sides, imitative rivalry must tend to become reciprocal […] In other words, the individual who first acts as a model will experience an increase in his own appropriative urge when he finds himself thwarted by his
imitator. And reciprocally. [...] Violence is generated in this process; or rather violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means (Girard 1996: 9).

In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Agamemnon reminds us of the presence of mimetic rivalry in Helen’s history, and summarises the extremity of rivalry experienced by her suitors, each of whom vowed that if he did not win her, he would kill the man who did. In order to prevent the outbreak of violence, her father, Tyndareus, made them take an oath that whichever of them won her hand would win with it a pledge that should she ever be taken from him, ‘All would take up arms and march against him, be he Greek/ Or Asiatic, and level his city to the ground’ (lines 61–63, Trans. David Kovacs). Helene Foley highlights the way in which Tyndareus’ oath acts as a mechanism to suppress the eruption of mimetic violence between Helen’s rival suitors, and paraphrases Agamemnon’s perspective thus: ‘Tyndareus used the ruse of the oath by the suitors to forestall temporarily a disastrous outbreak of reciprocal hostility and allowed Helen to choose a husband wherever the winds of passion swept her’.12 Foley’s choice of words, ‘forestall temporarily’, suggests something inevitable about the eventual eruption of violence between rivals for Helen’s affection. Indeed, mimetic rivalry continues to be the touchstone of her fate. Desired and stolen by Paris, her husband Menelaus invokes the suitors’ oath to Tyndareus and *Iphigenia in Aulis* opens when all the former suitors have gathered with their ships in Aulis, bent not only on the recovery of Helen, the ‘desired object’, but on the destruction of Troy. Predictably, Girard argues, the importance of the ‘desired object’ to warring rivals Greece and Troy becomes increasingly insignificant, as the conflict itself dominates their focus: ‘Beyond a certain level of intensity they are totally absorbed and the disputed object becomes secondary, even irrelevant’ (1996: 13).

12 Foley (1985: 75).
Whether the desired object is an artefact, a person, or an attribute such as power, Girard argues that under the effects of mimetic rivalry, there is always a danger that the community ‘turns into a mob’ (1996: 12). In his Iphigenia in Aulis, Euripides shows an acute understanding of the build-up of tension in such a situation and the threat of uncontrolled, mutinous violence that it poses. Mimetic rivalry is the root cause of why the Greeks have gathered in Aulis. Once they are installed there, Foley argues that a ‘Girardian sacrificial crisis’ (1985: 99) develops, where ‘the eris of the army, which was exploding in stasis (sedition) and an uncontrolled surge toward a ritual lynching, is redirected to war’ (78). Agamemnon grieves the loss of his daughter, but fears more that by not sacrificing her, by not appeasing Artemis, he will unleash a violent attack on his person and authority by ‘The whole assembly of the Achaean armament’ (line 114). He fears that the oracle’s pronouncement of the necessity of Iphigenia’s sacrifice will be published by either Calchas or Odysseus and that the troops will turn against him for not complying with it.

In Girardian terms, then, Iphigenia at Aulis opens with mimetic rivals vying for possession of Helen: two kingdoms, Greek and Trojan. However, the tensions generated by this external conflict ignite internal divisions within the Greek camp, and in accordance with Girard’s theory, mimetic rivalries proliferate. For example, who will control the information in the oracle? Who will maintain control of the restless Greek troops in the absence of wind as they anxiously anticipate departure for war? Girard explains:

‘Once the contagion of mimetic violence is reintroduced into the community, it cannot be contained. The community, then, changes its tactic entirely. Instead of trying to roll back mimetic violence it tries to get rid of it by encouraging it and bringing it to a climax that triggers the happy solution of ritual sacrifice with the help of a substitute victim’.
In this way the scapegoat becomes a source of reconciliation, ‘mimetic antagonism is ultimately unitative, or rather reunitive’ (1996: 13).

*The Surrogate Victim*

The ‘happy solution’ that will not only appease Artemis but also maintain order in Aulis, is the oracle requiring the sacrifice of Iphigenia. In Girard’s terms this solution is only made possible through the workings of the ‘scapegoat effect’: ‘By scapegoat effect I mean that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party […] They feel relieved of their tensions and they coalesce into a more harmonious group’. Girard suggests that the scapegoat effect involves at least one of two possible transferences by the collective onto the victim: the transfer of responsibility for disorder, and the transfer of newly-found peace (through sacrifice), ascribing him/her with the powers that make resolution possible (1996: 12). In the opening scenes of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, before the protagonist’s conversion to self-sacrifice for the collective good, the latter process of transference is clearly more pertinent than the former, as the purpose of Iphigenia’s sacrifice is not only to win fair winds, but also the restoration of order among the Greeks. The ‘surrogate victim’, according to Girard, would generally be drawn from the fringes of society: prisoners of war or slaves. Perhaps this is one of the factors that renders Iphigenia’s choice as victim so shocking. Due to her relationship to Agamemnon we perceive her as inhabiting a centre of socio-political power. But Girard observes that kings and princes, precisely because they occupy positions at the top of vertically organised societies, can also be perceived as separate from the rest of society. Iphigenia, therefore, ‘… escapes society, so to speak, via the roof, just as the pharmakos escapes via the cellar’ (1977: 12). Moreover, the more critical the situation, the more precious the victim; Iphigenia is the daughter of the head of a highly militarised society at war and as such, she is in
the eye of the storm. Agamemnon not only asks the Greek people to make sacrifices for the war effort but proves that he, too, is willing to do so.

Girard’s understanding of the nature of scapegoating and sacrifice is firmly grounded in an appreciation of the dynamics of power and the historical importance of protecting social orders and structures. However, it is equally grounded in his recognition of ‘sacral violence’, the central role played by religious belief in the act of sacrifice, and this is a particularly complex and troubling aspect of both Euripides’ Iphigenia at Aulis and Reyes’ Ifigenia cruel. For Girard, the theological basis for sacrifice cannot be denied. It is the god who demands the victim, and the sacred nature of the act is what renders it ritual as opposed to murder. In order to function as a sacred act, however, it is vital that the celebrant must not understand its true social function: the prevention of internal, uncontained, ‘mimetic violence’. This will be the case, he argues, even where ‘collective belief appears so absurd to the detached observer, if there is one, that he is tempted to believe the mob is not duped by its own identification of the scapegoat as culprit. The mob appears insincere and hypocritical. In reality, the mob really believes. If we understand this, we also understand that the scapegoat effect is real; it is an unconscious phenomenon, but not in the sense of Freud’ (1996: 12). It is important to reiterate that Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis exemplifies a model of scapegoating which focuses not on culpability, (the transfer of responsibility for disorder onto the victim), but on necessary sacrifice (the transfer of the means to restore peace and order onto the victim). In Girard’s analysis, the belief that the victim possesses one or both of these powers is fundamental to the scapegoating effect.

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13 In the case of Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis, I apply Girard’s category of ‘mob’ behaviour to the threat of violent mutiny posed by Agamemnon’s troops. In the context of Reyes’ play and my interpretation of its relationship to post-revolutionary Mexico, I interpret the ‘mob’ as representing political factions whose ‘mimetic rivalry’ repeatedly erupts in political violence in the 1920s.
It is also worth noting Girard’s observation that Euripides’ tragedies share his perspective that sacrifice functions as both sacred violence and a means of social control. He cites Clytemnestra in Euripides’ Electra as an example: ‘Clytemnestra explains that the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia would have been justified if it had been performed to save human lives. The tragedian enlightens us, through Clytemnestra, on the ‘normal’ function of human sacrifice: ‘in order to prevent the sack of the city, to help his home, to rescue his children, sacrificing one to save the others, I could than have pardoned him. But for the sake of brazen Helen’ (1977: 11). The implication here is that Agamemnon has transgressed a notional ‘true’ purpose of sacrifice: the protection of a society from violence. This view of Iphigenia’s sacrifice in Iphigenia in Aulis as ‘corrupt’, in religious terms, and motivated by impure motives, is described emphatically by Foley as ‘murder thinly disguised as sacrifice’ and ‘symptomatic of a social environment in which violence is proliferating uncontrollably’ (40). This perspective casts Agamemnon as a man driven by ambition, to the exclusion of all compassion. And yet, in the opening scenes of Iphigenia in Aulis, prior to the heroine’s conversion to patriotic self-sacrifice, Agamemnon’s professed view of the prophecy of sacrifice is a complex one. It is more nuanced in religious terms than a mere transference of the power to restore peace onto the victim: he believes in the miraculous potential of Iphigenia’s sacrifice to purchase Artemis’ cooperation and grant the Greek fleet the winds they need to sail from Aulis, and at the same time he also believes that his daughter’s sacrifice is a trap set for him by the gods, a regrettable but inevitable price to be paid in order to keep control of the forces gathered in Aulis (lines 529-537). The question of belief by the engineers and celebrants of sacrifice is a complex one in

14 Both Foley (1985) and Goff (1999) have discussed Euripides’ treatment of the sacrifice at Aulis in relation to Girard’s ‘mimetic violence’. Goff, in particular, privileges the relations between community and violence, and argues that ‘on the tragic stage, sacrifice is invoked as a cover for murder, as in the Oresteia, or alternatively, as in the IA, exposed as nothing other than a glorified murder’ (109).
Iphigenia in Aulis, and equally complex in Ifigenia cruel, a point to which we will return in relation to Iphigenia’s role as sacrificing priestess and Reyes’ characterisation of King Thoas.

**Self-sacrifice and Sacrificial Duty**

Neither Euripides’ nor Reyes’ protagonists choose to face sacrifice, but both attempt to wrest some control over their situation. In Iphigenia in Aulis, Euripides’ heroine rises above the political insecurities and mimetic rivalries of the Greeks, and comes to accept her sacrifice for the good of her people. In contrast, Reyes’ Iphigenia expresses no sense of identification with the cause of Panhellenism. When Orestes and his friend Pylades are shipwrecked on the shores of Tauris and brought to her, a scene of anagnorisis, or recognition, unfolds. Now, with full restoration of her memory and knowledge of her past, Iphigenia is faced with a harrowing choice between two possible forms of self-sacrifice. If she escapes from Tauris with Orestes, she must give herself over to the wills of Apollo and her family – a family whose bloody history of reprisal killings she is repelled by. Alternatively, she can reject Orestes and her bloodline and refuse to return to Mycenae. Such a rejection implies a refusal to assist Orestes in papering over the sins of the past – including internecine sacrifice and scapegoating - but it comes at a high price for herself. By opting to remain in Tauris to serve Artemis, she foregoes the possibility of a return to her homeland, of marriage or children; this is the form of self-sacrifice she chooses.

While this act of self-sacrifice echoes the shift in the heroine’s position in the Iphigenia in Aulis, in Reyes’ text the effectiveness of self-sacrifice is much more limited. Even though she has switched roles from victim to celebrant, his Iphigenia is still trapped by her relationship to the practice of sacrifice. Her decision could scarcely be described as a free choice, but rather reflects her perspective on the lesser of two evils, and the depth of her abhorrence at her own family’s

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15 The term ‘casta’ (caste), is used rather pointedly by Reyes in his Commentary: ‘una casta criminal’, (a criminal caste), to denote the House of Atreus (1959: 358).
actions in Aulis and subsequently. Both options have been foisted on her by the gods: she did not choose to be rescued from the sacrificial blade by Artemis, to serve her as priestess and live among the Taurians; nor did she request Apollo’s decision that her brother should rescue her and take her home. Above all, neither option can undo her father’s decision to sacrifice her in Aulis, a decision which has marked her life indelibly and whose consequences she has been unable to escape, even with the intervention of the gods.

The nature of her self-sacrifice, the fact that she opts to stay in Tauris and not return to Greece, has been read as a refusal to accept her family’s authority over her, and a rejection of Orestes’ role as redeemer of his ‘raza’.16 Reyes states quite clearly in his Commentary on the text that he wants to remove the mantel of saviour from Orestes, and place it on the shoulders of his sister: ‘According to the straightforward classical interpretation, it falls to Orestes to save them from the curse […] I wanted to entrust their redemption to Iphigenia’ (1959: 357).17 Orestes’ characterisation is relevant in this respect, as Reyes depicts his identification with his lineage as absolute. As the final Act opens, Reyes has him recite a theogonic account of his lineage, from the origins of creation to the House of Atreus, and describes it in his Breve Noticia accompanying the text, as ‘a heavy and voluminous piece, in the style of genealogical poetry’ (1959: 315).18 The message is clear: Orestes defines himself in purely genealogical terms, and his pedantry on the subject, its formal weightiness, are deployed consciously by Reyes to slow down the pace of the play and weigh heavily on the audience. Orestes feels no desire to escape the weight of the past; he cannot see beyond the self-absorption of his house. Similarly, he is

16 Del Río picks up on Reyes’ use of the term ‘raza’ (race), which she interprets as representing not Mexican nationality, but its upper classes, regarded in the Revolutionary period as a cursed people (1993: 113).
17 ‘Según la sencilla interpretación clásica a Orestes toca redimir la maldición. [...] A Ifigenia [...], he querido confiar la redención de la raza’.
18 ‘un fragmento pesado y voluminoso, al estilo de la poesía genealógica’. 
incapable of conceiving any form of identity for his sister outside the roles assigned to her by her family, and by Apollo. Iphigenia has just regained her memories of Aulis. It is scarcely surprising in this context that she reject the highly circumscribed kinship offered by Orestes.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite the high price she pays for this choice, the play’s ending has generally been interpreted as a form of liberation for Reyes’ character, and indeed as an expression of the author’s own rejection of political reprisal in the context of his family’s tragic involvement in Mexican revolutionary politics. Such interpretations are in no small part prompted by Reyes’ own \textit{Commentary}: ‘She rises above the vendetta of Mycenae, exploiting the momentary hesitation of the fates, and choosing emancipation, refuses to return to her homeland.’\textsuperscript{20} The play’s final scene is certainly an audacious departure from canonical versions which present Iphigenia’s escape from Tauris as a deliverance myth, wherein she escapes from the barbarous Taurians to be reunited with her family. Here, she does not forgive her family for their murderous past. However, to read the ending purely as a rejection of violence does not sufficiently interrogate her contribution to the continuance of sacrifice in Tauris in her role as priestess. It is useful, at this point, to return to Girard’s insistence on the importance of belief in the sacred nature of sacrifice by its celebrants, and the importance, too, that the act retain an element of mystery. They must not understand the dynamics of social control that underlie it: ‘the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding. The celebrants do not and

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\textsuperscript{19} Iphigenia’s self-sacrifice has also been read as a rejection of Apollo’s authority. Teja explores the significance for the protagonist of the battle between Artemis’ pre-Hellenic, matriarchal religion and the emerging patriarchal cult of Apollo (2004: 238). She reads Iphigenia’s devotion to the goddess in a positive light, as a quest for identity and a mother (2004: 246).
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\textsuperscript{20} ‘Ella, superior a la vendetta de Micenas, aprovecha la hora en que los destinos vacilan, y escogiendo la emancipación, se niega a volver a la patria.’
\end{flushright}
must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding. It is the god who supposedly demands the victims’ (1977: 7). When Reyes’ Iphigenia remembers the sacrifice of Aulis she is forced out of ignorance of her family’s crimes: ‘What am I to do, Goddess? Come out of your mystery?’ (Reyes 1959: 341). This does not, however, change her relationship to her sacrificial duties in Tauris. In this respect, she continues to demonstrate a lack of understanding of the social function of sacrifice that complies with the Girardian model. The relationship between the sacred and social dimensions of sacrifice in Reyes’ Tauris is particularly opaque. In this respect, it is an aspect of the play that deviates dramatically from the Iphigenia in Aulis. In order to tease out the implications of Girardian méconnaissance in Ifigenia cruel, the following sections of this article will explore the relationship between the sacred nature of sacrifice and social control in the play, and in the political context of post-revolutionary Mexico at the time of its composition.

Sacrifice and Social Control

In the final Act of Ifigenia cruel, Thoas, the King of Tauris, waives the sacred demands of the Taurian cult of Artemis that outsiders encroaching on her territory be sacrificed, and grants Orestes and Pylades freedom to leave Tauris. Hall sees a positive move in Reyes’ text away from colonial readings of Tauris as a ‘barbaric’ place governed by a cruel tyrant, and points out that when the Thoas grants Orestes and Pylades permission to leave, ‘For the first time in the history of Euripides’ Iphigenia in Tauris, the king of Tauris is allowed to teach the Greeks a moral lesson’. She elaborates:

Reyes’ Tauris, where after her struggle his Iphigenia elects to stay, is a remarkable place. Its inhabitants regard themselves as ancient and civilized; they are a pastoral people, expert in music and song. They do not travel away from their own land and do

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21 ‘¿Pero qué hago, Diosa? ¿Salgo de tu misterio?’
not understand why the Greeks do. They are not violent, and aside from their ritual sacrifices of those who invade their country, are a peaceful and gentle people (2013: 280-281).

There are some important features that Hall’s reading of ‘ritual sacrifice’ in Tauris does not take into account. For example, it does not acknowledge the historical precedent of Aztec religious practice to Iphigenia’s sacrificial duty.²² Nor does it explain the physical aggression with which she executes that duty. Unlike classical versions of Iphigenia, Barrenechea notes that this priestess personally kills her human victims (2012: 10). In Act One, The Chorus of Taurian women describe the apparent relish with which she does so: ‘What a sight, when your arms flex/in eagerness to drown a man!’ (1959: 319).²³ Hall rightly points out that King Thoas’ characterisation in the play is sympathetic, not ‘barbaric’, as in so many earlier versions of the myth and that this is possible because Reyes steps outside of the framework of binary opposition between foreign barbarism and Greek civilisation. However, the temporal setting of the play does not specify any divergence from its classical precedents, and the reader could assume that this Tauris, like Euripides’, is a ‘pre-civilised’ setting where the practice of human sacrifice would not be out of place. Like Barrenechea, Hall suggests a strict segregation of sacred and human violence in Reyes’ text; the Taurians only kill for religious purposes. But this ignores the rather mixed signals received by the audience: that Tauris is highly ‘civilised’ in agricultural and cultural practices, but ‘pre-civilised’ in its ritual practices.

A Girardian reading of the situation would seek a relationship between the social stability of Tauris and scapegoating, whereby violence would be funnelled into ritual acts of

²² Reyes comments in his Commentary that his Iphigenia ‘sings the praises of human sacrifice in the same way a priest at an Aztec temple could have done’ (‘canta las excelencias del sacrificio humano como pudo hacerlo algún oficiante’) (1959: 357-8). See further commentaries on this aspect of her sacrificial duty in Montemayor (2009) and Paz (1994).

²³ ‘¡Qué cosa es verte retorcer los brazos/ en el afán de ahogar a un hombre!’
sacrifice in order to protect the stability of the King’s governance from internal rivalries. Following the logic of this model, outsiders, marginal and vulnerable, would be the perfect scapegoats. By depicting them as a threat, Thoas’ regime in Tauris could be argued to have found a perfect mechanism by which to stymie any potential upsurge of internal dissent. Because of its insistence on méconnaissance, the fact that the celebrant of sacrifice is unaware of the motive of social control underlying his actions, the Girardian model would see no contradiction in a sympathetic king’s unconscious scapegoating of outsiders in order to maintain unity under his leadership. According to this logic, Reyes’ Iphigenia would embody the act of physical and moral survival through necessary ignorance, in her service to the goddess. It is intriguing that Reyes does not directly confront the possibility that human sacrifice in Tauris could serve a socio-political function. Rather, the practice is presented as an irresistible given. It would be very tempting to impose a Girardian analysis here, and insist on a connection between human sacrifice and the preservation of peace in this rather utopian version of Tauris; tempting to claim that this peace is in fact built on the scapegoating of outsiders. This would misrepresent the text, however, as there is no evidence of ‘mimetic violence’ in Reyes’ Tauris, and no allusion to rival political factions in need of unification through the sacrificing of scapegoats.

Moreover, human sacrifice in the play presents another challenge to Girard’s model, and to its definition as sacred violence. Visually as well as conceptually, it is difficult for the audience of Ifigenia cruel to perceive these sacrifices as sacred, given the apparent absence of ritual that surrounds them. While Barrenechea’s work on the need to distinguish sacred from human violence can help the modern reader to accept Iphigenia’s transformation from sacrificial victim in Aulis to enthusiastic sacrificer in Tauris, the absence of ritual surrounding Artemis’ cult here makes it difficult to identify the act as ‘sacred’. This is in stark contrast to Euripides’ Iphigenia in Taurus where, Goff reminds us, the ‘materiality’ of ritual is stressed through the presence of the altar stone soaked in blood and temple walls hung with trophies of victims (Goff
There is no mention of an altar in Reyes’ text, only the colossal, intimidating statue of the goddess which overshadows Iphigenia’s thoughts and deeds (Barrenechea 2012:15-16). Whether the fervour of her service of the goddess is religiously or psychologically motivated, it is carried out brutally and unflinchingly. The priestess wades out into the waves to physically wrestle with and kill her victims. The Chorus in Act One elaborate: ‘You prefer your victims angry,/ first overcome then opened up,/ so Artemis can breathe in/ the exhalation of their innards’ (Reyes 1959: 319). If these are ritual sacrifices, there is very little reference to rite. In *Iphigenia in Tauris* the ‘corrupt’ nature of human sacrifice by the Taurians is acknowledged and ‘corrected’ at the end of the play when three new rites are established by Athena, ‘as the chief means of closure and healing for the grim deeds that have unfolded, while new rituals are generated to ‘replace those corrupted in the course of the tragic events’ (Goff 1999: 110). Furthermore, Foley reminds us that ‘Ritual may be used to recall the past for the purpose of re-ordering and even predetermining the future’ (1985: 22). In the absence of ritual, these are precisely the things that do not take place in Reyes’ play: the ‘corrupt’ practice of human sacrifice is never ‘corrected’, and commemorative ritual is never put to use as a means of positively affecting the future. It could be argued that in some respects, the human sacrifice in *Ifigenia cruel* fails to meet the criteria of ‘sacred violence’, and that the absence of new rites at the end of the play contributes greatly to its overall hopelessness. In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, blame for human sacrifice is attributed to the Taurians, and also to Artemis, whose concern for ritual purity is abandoned when it comes to human sacrifice (lines 389-91). Reyes is even less sympathetic to the goddess, and his representation of the practice of human sacrifice resembles more a death cult than a regenerative ritual.24 Clearly, human sacrifice in *Iphigenia in Tauris* is deployed as an expression of barbarian ‘otherness’ and as ‘anti-Greek’, but what does it

24 Notwithstanding the overall positive thrust of her analysis of the protagonist’s self-sacrifice as a form of self-determination, Teja also notes the absence of any regenerating ritual in the play (2004: 242).
represent for Reyes? How should the audience respond? Are we to read it as an expression of divine tyranny, or as evidence of some dark, atavistic impulse in human nature? The fact that it does not appear to serve any social function in Reyes’ Tauris is problematic for the Girardian model of sacrifice. Here, Iphigenia acts as an unconscious and unquestioning perpetrator of corrupt violence that appears to be normalised in an otherwise benign and enlightened state. While there is no evidence of mimetic violence in Reyes’ Tauris, however, I would argue that at a metaphorical level, Iphigenia’s obedient practice of human sacrifice in service of Artemis is not without social and political implications. Knowing that Ifigenia cruel was written in the aftermath of a bloody and chaotic revolution, and that deadly internecine rivalries continued to plague Mexican politics, it is difficult to read the descriptions of sacrifice in Tauris without reflecting on the relationship between violence and public life in Mexico in the early 1920s.

*Sacrifice and Post-Revolutionary Mexico*

Alfonso Reyes had witnessed critical levels of political violence in Mexico. His father, General Bernardo Reyes, was killed during a failed uprising against elected Revolutionary President, Madero. On February 9, 1913, he led an assault on the National Palace, where he was shot and died. By February 23, the President and Vice President had been assassinated. In the political aftermath, all Madero’s opponents were branded as traitors to the Revolution. Inevitably, the entire Reyes family – regardless of their individual political sympathies – were targeted. The situation was not helped by the activities of one of Alfonso’s brothers, Rogelio, who had accompanied his father in the uprising. When Victoriano Huerta took power after Madero’s death, Rodolfo accepted a Ministerial position, a decision deeply regretted by Alfonso, who had himself rejected Huerta’s offer to make him Private Secretary, in an effort to distance

25 The tragic betrayals that characterised these period of the Mexican Revolution are rigorously documented and analysed by Garciadiego (2011: 71-123), (2009: 31-35) and Gilly (2013: 43-82).
the family from the new regime (Del Río 1993: 111). Instead, he departed for Paris in August 1913 to work for the Mexican Legation, but tenure there was as short-lived as Huerta’s regime. By 1914 both brothers were living in exile in Madrid, but while Rodolfo agitated against Venustiano Carranza’s Government, Alfonso prepared himself to serve the post-revolutionary state (Curiel Defossé 2015:106-108). This was made possible in 1920 when Álvaro Obregón became President and Reyes was re-admitted to the Mexican Legation. In his correspondence with José María Chacon y Calvo in November 1922, he looks forward to a position in either Foreign Affairs or Education. In the same letter, he writes excitedly about the first draft of Ifgenia cruel. The fact that talks with Government representatives were already underway when Reyes was writing the play in 1922, lends weight to Arenas Monreal’s suggestion that the experience of exile and the anticipation of a return to Mexico impacted on the text (2004: 118-120).

Paradoxically, the letter also expresses considerable anxiety about the possibility of an imminent return to Mexico. Having followed avidly the political convulsions of his homeland, and craved more contact from his old friends and acquaintances there, he was now filled with trepidation, and expresses his fear of a ‘sudden change’ and subsequent loss of autonomy (2004: 117-119). It is logical that the promise of return would have stirred up complex and painful feelings about his father’s death and the circumstances in which he had left Mexico. But the language and tone of the letter also express irritation with the lack of clear communication from his old acquaintance José Vasconcelos in the Ministry of Education, and an underlying fear of ‘being used’ (‘que no dispongan de mí’, 2004: 118). García Diego points out that assurances given by Obregón’s Government were key to Reyes’ decision to return to the diplomatic fold, as it ‘promised to be conciliatory, to distance itself from the inter-faction and socio-political hatreds of the Carranza’s regime’ (2009: 53). Nonetheless, Reyes feared that his family’s anti-

26 See also Shaughnessy (2015).
revolutionary legacy would make him the target of some political factions (54). Underlying Reyes’ letters during and following the composition of *Ifigenia cruel* is an awareness that the threat of political violence in Mexico was still very real, and that internecine feuds between factions could be ignited at any time. Mexican politics since 1910 had seen the rise of a seemingly endless succession of political factions: Reyismo, Maderismo, Orozquismo, Villismo, Zapatismo, Constitucionalismo, Convencionismo, Obregonismo. ‘Mimetic rivalries’ to own and control the nation’s land, resources and wealth continued, and rivalry for leadership repeatedly erupted in political violence, assassinations and military uprisings. Despite the promises of Obregón’s Government, the years 1920-24 saw a power struggle among its own leaders. In 1923, De la Huerta led an unsuccessful rebellion against Obregón. The same year, Pancho Villa was assassinated. In such an unstable climate, Reyes had good reason to be cautious.

Without drawing excessively simplistic analogies between the political climate in Mexico in the early 1920s and the ambivalent ending of Reyes’ *Ifigenia cruel*, a case can and has been made for reading the role of Artemis in Tauris as resembling the newly established political order in Mexico.27 Octavio Paz pointed out shortly after Reyes’ death in 1959, that his position in Spain in 1920 was not so different from Iphigenia’s in Tauris: each had a brother who saw vengeance as ‘a son’s duty’; each rejected the path of revenge, but in doing so - Paz’s turn of phrase is interesting here - they are respectively ‘condemned’ to serve a bloodthirsty goddess, Artemis in one case, the Mexican Revolution in the other (Paz 1994: 228). Another political reading of the play is also possible, where Orestes represents the pre-Revolutionary political class, arrogant in its sense of entitlement to lead, Iphigenia represents the Revolution, already sacrificed in the Aulis of the Decena Trágica to further the political interests of Huerta’s faction, and is now employed as an inexhaustible source of violence by other groupings. The

27 ‘...rehusarse a seguir la voz de la sangre es condenarse a servir a una diosa sanguinaria, Artemisa en un caso, La Revolución Mexicana es el otro.’
political institutions of the post-revolutionary state may have appeared to function in an orderly manner, but as in Reyes’ Tauris, beneath the surface there simmered an acceptance of the inevitability of violence and sacrifice. It is not unrealistic, then, to suggest that the ongoing human sacrifice implied in the ending of Reyes’ play reflects the levels of violence that continued to dominate Mexican society at this time, despite the many sacrifices already made in the cause of the Revolution and the reforms it had achieved.

In his seminal article, ‘Mimesis and Violence’, Girard argues:

Mythology and religious cults form systems of representation necessarily untrue to their own genesis. The episode of mimetic violence and reconciliation is always recollected and narrated, as well as re-enacted, from the perspective of its beneficiaries, who are also its puppets. From the standpoint of the scapegoaters and their inheritors – the religious community – there is no such thing as scapegoating in our sense (1996: 14).

For Girard, reconciliation is inextricably linked to ‘mimetic violence’ because the primary motivation for the sacrifice of a scapegoat is to bring about reconciliation between rivals. However, his analysis also accepts that such reconciliation can only ever be short-lived; that the ‘scapegoat effect’ provides only temporary relief for internecine rivalries. While there may no evidence of such rivalries in Reyes’ idealised Tauris, Girard’s analysis is certainly borne out by the successive sacrifices of one revolutionary leader after another between 1910 and 1924, in actions that merely allowed other groupings to form alliances and hold power temporarily.

Girard’s words on sacrifice as a religious practice ‘necessarily untrue to its own genesis’ can also be applied to political systems of representation, particularly where these emerge from situations of internal conflict. ‘The mythic systems of representation obliterate the scapegoating on which they are founded, and they remain dependent on this obliteration,’ (1996,
In other words, the denial of conscious past sacrifices is essential to the survival of each new political order. In order to consolidate their own power, leaders such as Carranza and Obregón were willing to sacrifice the interests of the rural marginalised, as represented by Zapata and Villa, assassinated in 1919 and 1923 respectively. It is impossible to judge if this willingness was entirely conscious, or whether they were locked into a Girardian unconsciousness born of an extended, brutalising period of violence, and thus unaware of how their actions contributed to the perpetuation of cyclical violence. Either way, their grip on power proved to be fleeting, as each faction, in turn, was ousted to make way for another.

Reyes’ *Ifigenia cruel* reminds us that in the wake of betrayal, scapegoating and sacrifice, reconciliation can never be absolute. The acts of internecine violence committed by the House of Atreus are conscious, premeditated, repeated, and their consequences are unavoidable in the play; family reunification is no longer possible and Iphigenia continues to live out the effects of the sinister deeds of Aulis. Reyes was conscious of the dramatic transformation undergone by Euripides’ heroine in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, from pleading for her life to dignified acceptance of what she understands to be the necessity of sacrifice for the collective good. We have already seen how his heroine also undergoes a transformation, but in this case from an absence of identity, homeland and memory, to a dignified rejection of all the familial and social ties that made her a scapegoat in Aulis. However, the psychological adjustment that Reyes’ heroine has to make brings no material transformation to her circumstances and no sense of transcendence. In this sense it differs greatly from Euripides’ play. It also represents a sharp departure from the sense of closure and reconciliation in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris*, where Iphigenia’s position as priestess gives her an authority among the Taurians that she is able to exploit in order to deceive Thoas and escape. Moreover, Goff reminds us that Euripides’ play is ‘informed in a more general way by ritual, in that Iphigenia is a priestess and the play turns on her non-performance of her cultic duties’ (110). In contrast, there is nothing empowering about
service to the goddess for Reyes’ Iphigenia, who does not challenge the nature or practice of human sacrifice in Tauris, and who will continue to perform her ‘cultic duties’. The brooding atmosphere that dominates *Iṣigenia cruel*, the absence of reconciliation and the promise of future sacrifices, were arguably informed by Reyes’ experience of political violence in Mexico and the apparent impossibility of reconciliation between warring political factions that persisted between 1920 and 1923. Against this backdrop, Reyes’ Iphigenia could be seen as representing the ‘collateral damage’ of conflict. She cannot escape the permanent effects of her scapegoating in Aulis by others, or the consequences of her self-sacrifice in Tauris. This is the ‘cruel’ truth of Reyes’ short, but remarkably evocative text. The ending of the play, in particular, seems to project an anxiety as to the outcomes of the cyclical violence enacted by Iphigenia’s family. There will be no more reprisal killings in the House of Atreus, but the memory of Iphigenia’s scapegoating in Aulis and the horrors of parricide have come to Tauris to haunt her, and human sacrifices will continue there, unquestioned by their celebrant or by the state, as represented by King Thoas. Whether this anxiety is conscious or unconscious, a case can be made for reading Reyes’ Tauris as an acknowledgement of the haunting presence of political violence in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Goff’s analysis of the *Iphigenia in Tauris* offers some interesting points of comparison here. In both plays, violence is directed only outwards and ‘seems to be absent from the Taurian community’. She reflects that Euripides’ play was produced at a time of crisis in Athens, and that ‘Alongside its narrative of escape and liberation, it has some driving anxieties of its own’. She alludes to the conspiracy that in 411 brought down the democratic government, and suggests that doubts remain at the end of the play as to ‘the city’s performance as saviour’, the ability of Athens to absorb and heal the sins of the House of Atreus. Reyes’ *Iṣigenia cruel* was also written at a time of crisis in the author’s homeland, and despite the claims made by its author in its accompanying Commentary for the ‘truly
redemptive mission of this new Iphigenia’, it is unclear who or what has been saved (Reyes, 1959: 359). Clearly, his native Mexico, to which he hopes to return, is not performing the role of ‘saviour’ for its own political victims, and the overriding impression the audience is left with, is of a ‘driving anxiety’ behind the play’s exploration of normalised violence and its consequences.

Demystifying sacred violence

Between 1910 and 1920 almost a million people died in the Mexican Revolution; by 1924, all the Revolution’s leaders except Obregón had been killed (Krauze 2011: 122). The response by successive post-revolutionary Governments from the 1920s to the 1940s to canonise the martyrs of the Revolution in the popular imagination, could be construed as either a cynical exercise in self-justification, or an attempt to provide consolation in the face of so much human tragedy. For many of its anti-clerical participants, the Revolution had supplanted the central role of religion as a moral compass and source of transcendental truths. The sacrifices made in its cause were venerated: ‘In the collective imagination, the heroes of the fatherland would become lay saints’ (1998: 230).

In the early 1920s, however, the violence and scale of death in the Revolution were still recent memories, too recent to be gilded with an aura of sanctity in the popular imagination. The composition of Ifigenia cruel coincides with the initial phase of José Vasconcelos’ promotion of muralism in the period 1920-24, in the Escuela Preparatoria Nacional. The majority are by José Clemente Orozco, and it is telling that they do not glorify or

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28 Reyes himself was not immune to these tendencies, and in his memoirs and poetry, he draws artificial distinctions between his father’s human face and his anti-revolutionary military activities in such a way that allows him to present the General in messianic terms. For detailed analyses of Reyes’ mythification of his father, see Curiel Defossé (2015: 108-144) and Arenas Monreal (2004: 43-72).
sanctify political violence in any way. While some of his murals present positive images of progress under Obregón (*The Engineers, The Destruction of the Old Order*), others depict the blindness of ideologically-motivated violence (*The Revolutionary Trinity*) and a tragic war-weariness (*Revolutionaries, The Grave-Digger*).²⁹

There is a fundamental paradox at the heart of Reyes’ use of myth. Everything he had witnessed should have left him wary of the dangers of mystifying sacrifice, and yet he chooses myth, a genre that does just this, as the vehicle to explore the themes of sacrifice and scapegoating, themes of enormous personal and political resonance for him at this time. His fascination with the Iphigenia myth centres on the political and familial dysfunctionality of Iphigenia’s sacrifice in Aulis, and on her role as sacrificing priestess in Tauris. These two elements undoubtedly resonated with a writer whose own father was regarded as either a sacrificial victim of the Revolution or a celebrant of its sacrifice, depending on the politics of the observer. The political and interpersonal dynamics of the myth, the complexities and ambiguities revealed therein by Euripides, gave Reyes a sufficiently distancing metaphor with which to explore painful political and personal relationships surrounding his father’s violent and public death. And yet, despite his literary indebtedness, Reyes rejects Euripidean reconciliation in the ending of *Ifigenia cruel*. In his *Commentary*, the author spells out his conviction that happy endings of reconciliation are unacceptable to the modern audience. He perceives the traditional conclusion of the myth as problematic in this regard, and acknowledges the impossibility of a painless resolution to such a brutal series of events: ‘Our intelligence can no longer accept such means of salvation. We believe that a curse will not be removed without the blow of further misfortune’ (Reyes 1959: 358).³⁰ There are many possible reasons why he


³⁰ ‘No admite ya nuestra inteligencia estos medios de salvación. Creemos que una maldición no se redime sino con el choque de otra fatalidad.’
should reject familial reconciliation in his own play: because he believed it was not credible for a modern audience; because neither he nor a modern audience could pretend that the trauma of Iphigenia’s sacrifice in Aulis could be erased; because reconciliation had never been fully achieved in his own family; because the levels of ‘collateral damage’ during the Mexican Revolution and the political violence that continued in its aftermath, made it difficult for him to imagine a future without pointless sacrifice.

In her discussion of Girard’s work on Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Euripides’ Bacchae, Foley points out how both plays ‘simultaneously commemorate and efface the original crisis’ of mimetic rivalry and internal violence (1985: 54). Each representation of the myth recalls the roots of sacrificial practice in reciprocal rivalry and the prevention of internal conflict through the sacrifice of a scapegoat, while at the same time seeking to obscure the fact that sacrifice is demanded by men and not the gods. The same could be said of Reyes’ Ifigenia cruel, where the practice of human sacrifice in Tauris reminds us of the mimetic rivalries of Aulis, but where human responsibility is again effaced by its projection onto Artemis. Furthermore, the sacrifices of Tauris function at a metaphorical level to both ‘commemorate and efface’ internecine violence in Mexico. Through the metaphor of Artemis’ cult, Reyes projects the way in which the state simultaneously recalls and denies its own history of mimetic rivalry, through the mystification of sacrifice.

Girard argues that in Bacchae, Euripides demystifies the double illusion of a violent deity and an innocent community, almost revealing the origins of religious rite in the spontaneous scapegoating and sacrifice of a human victim. The end of the play, however, restores religious mystification of the truth by re-attributing the origins of violence to the gods (1977: 136-138). Perhaps Reyes’ Ifigenia cruel comes closer in spirit to Bacchae than to either of Euripides’ Iphigenia plays in this regard. On the one hand, it displays a demystifying impulse; it exposes the violence acted upon the heroine in Aulis as human, not divine; it also
allows her to resist the imposition of Orestes and Apollo’s wills by refusing to return to Greece. Yet her retreat into her role as priestess represents a re-mystification of violence by re-attributing it, unquestioned, to the demands of a god.

Girard’s evaluation of Euripides’ authorial choices can also be helpful in understanding Reyes. He laments the modern critical tendency to assume that Euripides ‘drew back’ from an ultimate revelation that the gods are the mere fictions of men, out of ‘timidity’:

Euripides, they suggest, hesitated from conventional propriety or simple prejudice to acknowledge that religion was nothing more than mystification; an illusion specifically designed to offer consolation or impose restraints.’ [...] ‘But Euripides speaks less in terms of religious ‘faith’ in the modern sense, then in terms of the transgressing of limits, of the fearsome knowledge that exists beyond these limits (1977: 129-130).

I would argue that Iphigenia’s méconnaissance, her willing participation in human sacrifice, is a necessary blindness, not because it preserves a scapegoating practice that resolves reciprocal rivalries or brings social unification to Tauris, but because the horror of her own actions would be too much to bear. The burden of truths she must carry is already excessive: her own sacrifice at Aulis; her exile from home and family; the revenge killings of both her parents. Like Euripides before him, Reyes’ choice not to utterly demystify sacred violence is not a ‘simple choice between belief and disbelief’ (1977: 130). There is no cause that can justify human sacrifice; Reyes, coming from a country torn by civil conflict, understands this. Iphigenia’s unawareness is therefore not a recommendation of wilful ignorance, but more an act of compassion on the part of the author. Whether psychologically or spiritually motivated, Iphigenia’s ‘possession’ by the goddess when she executes her victims, protects her from that ‘fearsome knowledge’ alluded to by Girard, the truth of the violence within herself: ‘Men
cannot confront the naked truth of their own violence without the risk of abandoning themselves to it entirely’ (Girard 1977: 82). While Iphigenia’s view of her family is beyond redemption, her méconnaissance saves her from an unredeemable view of herself.

Conclusions

The links drawn by Girard between human violence, the sacred, sacrifice and society cannot fully explain the role of human sacrifice in Reyes’ play, or the choices made by his Iphigenia. What is both novel and helpful in relation to Ifigenia cruel, however, is the way his ideas open up for discussion the relationship between social conflict and sacrifice. One of the most criticised aspects of Girard’s work is its universalising tendency and lack of attentiveness to the specificities of political and historical context (Foley 1985: 57-58). In order to counterbalance this universalising tendency, this article has outlined relevant details of the political conditions in Mexico at the time Reyes wrote the play, and of his personal circumstances as he moved from the position of exile into employment by successive post-revolutionary governments.

As we have seen, Girard’s ideas will not always ‘fit’ the literary text in every detail. In the course of examining Reyes’ text in the light of his ideas, however, many fertile inconsistencies have emerged. For example, the practice of human sacrifice does not appear to be a product of social conflict in the play’s action in Tauris. However, it could be said to echo or ‘commemorate’ the mimetic, social conflicts of Aulis. Moreover, Reyes’ text complies utterly with Girard’s view of violence that is collectively projected onto an external (in this case, divine) source. Ultimately, Girard’s work helps us to problematize the relationships between violence, sacrifice and society, and thus build on critical contributions

31 For further critical discussions of Girard see special issues of the Berkshire Review 14 (1979) and Diacritics 8 (March 1978).
on Reyes’ text by Arenas, Barrenechea, Hall and Teja. His insistence on the social function of all sacrifice makes it more difficult to accept a smooth, positive reading of the play’s conclusion.

Equally, it is important to locate Reyes’ treatment of sacrifice in relation to those texts that most deeply influenced his work. To extrapolate on Foley’s view that ‘the sacrificial metaphor had a complex independent development in tragic texts from Aeschylus to Euripides’ (1985: 60), *Ifigenia cruel* should be read as part of a complex, metaphorical continuum which cannot be contained within one, universalising theory. While many interpretations of the play’s ending are possible, Girard’s ideas nudge us towards politics and the social, not away from it. From a Girardian perspective, Artemis’ appetite for sacrifice can be read as a metaphoric expression for ongoing civil conflict in Mexico in the 1920s; Iphigenia’s ignorance of the dynamics of power underlying it, and her ‘possession’ by the goddess, as the blind loyalty of foot-soldiers in the Revolution and the uprisings that followed it; her self-sacrifice, an expression of the willingness of so many to serve the Revolution without personal gain; Iphigenia herself could also represent the sacrifice of the Revolution by power-seekers such as Huerta in 1913.

In the absence of a positive outcome for Iphigenia, the play relies on the power of Reyes’ poetic expression to alleviate the bleak nature of her unchanged prospects. In the closing moments, the Chorus speaks as though Iphigenia had achieved some real liberation through her decision to stay in Tauris. The tone seeks to give us a sense of consolation, but the claims made by the Chorus are difficult to marry to the events we have just witnessed: ‘choose whatever name you wish,/ call yourself what you want:/ you have made the course of destiny pause /
where the source of your freedom trickles forth’ (Reyes 1959: 349).32 The source and nature of

32 ‘escoge el nombre que te guste/ y llámate a ti misma como quieras:/ ya abriste pausa en los destinos, donde/
brinca la fuente de tu libertad.’
Iphigenia’s ‘freedom’ have been construed by Teja as her rejection of her family, and the assertion of her individual will. But the question remains: what kind of freedom can come from this, when she is still, in her own words, ‘re-born a slave’ to Artemis (Reyes 1959: 340)? There are undeniable tensions between the words of the Chorus at the end of the play and the reality of the protagonist’s situation. Foley highlights a similar discontinuity in Iphigenia in Aulis where, ‘The odes, like Iphigenia’s lyrics, do not deny the brutality of the events about to ensue, but their form and beauty translate it to another level’ (1985: 84). Reyes’ poetry, too, acknowledges the brutality of events past and present, but it does not provide transcendence; it does not transport its characters or the audience to ‘another level’ of experience.

Given Reyes’ humanistic outlook, the apparent absence of what Ricoeur sees in myth as the ‘disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening onto other possible worlds’ is surprising (Ricoeur 1982: 266). Ifigenia cruel gives some indication of the ability of myth to open up new insights into the past and the present. Reyes has re-written the inherited myth and opened up alternative perspectives for Iphigenia on her own identity. Through the recovery of her memory, she has gained access to her past life, with all the accompanying pain of loss and disillusionment. Her rejection of her family is unprecedented, but its result is a retreat into the re-mystification of violence, a shutting down of possibilities rather than an opening up. The play, therefore, does not offer glimpses of new realities that can ‘transcend the established limits’ of her actual life in Tauris at the service of Artemis (1982: 266). Weighed down by his own family and national tragedies, the possibilities of redemption and transformation may have seemed limited to Reyes at this time. The metaphorical expressions of hope that Euripides’ could resort to in new, regenerative rites, or dramatic divine intervention would not be acceptable to the modern, sceptical audience, but their absence adds to the devastating effect of the play’s conclusion. Girard, like Ricoeur, perceives something fundamentally positive in the ways that myth strives to give structure and expression to concepts or experiences not yet fully understood,
and the ways in which the creative impulse responds to mystery. ‘The endless diversity of myths and rituals derives from the fact that they all seek to recollect and reproduce something they never succeed in comprehending’ (1977: 316). Despite the contradictions in Reyes’ own relationship to myth, despite the bleakness of his Ifigenia cruel, it can, at least, be said that he shared this belief in the capacity of myth to offer new forms, structures and vessels for the commemoration and expression of human experiences that resist understanding, invite complexity, and stimulate the imagination.

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