

**Heroism or Delusion:
The Ambiguities of Opting for Death in *Iphigenia in Aulis***

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First produced in Athens in 405 BCE, a few months after Euripides' death and a year before Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War, *Iphigenia in Aulis* presents readers with ambiguities that are unyieldingly resistant to resolution. Is Agamemnon a tormented patriot? Is Clytemnestra the play's moral center? Will the Trojan War prove to be a triumph or a waste? Above all else, does Iphigenia die a martyr's glorious death for the cause of Greek freedom and unity? Or do childish illusions and self-regard make her a foolish collaborator in her destruction? For students learning to deal with ambiguity, *Iphigenia in Aulis* provides a compelling and disturbing challenge.

The general outlines of the story are familiar enough: the Greek army, eager to get to Troy, is becalmed at Aulis; Artemis demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, if the winds are to resume. Iphigenia first reacts to her fate with incomprehension and fear: "the marriage / Of Paris and Helen—Why must it touch / My life?" (280, 1236-37). She pleads for life: "It is better we live ever so / Miserably than die in glory" (281, 1252). But after she sits silently for a few minutes, her perspective has changed *completely*—so much so that Aristotle cites her in the *Poetics* as an unacceptably inconsistent character (82). She announces, "I want to die / Well and gloriously, putting away / From me whatever is weak and ignoble" (289-90, 1376-77). Her justification combines heroic vision with self-aggrandizement: "All Greece turns / Her eyes to me, to me only, great Greece / In her might—for through me is the sailing / Of the fleet, through me the sack and overthrow / Of Troy" (290, 1378-79).

Grand words, indeed! But what do we make of them? Is Iphigenia noble and visionary, blessedly sane in a mad world and the one soul in the play who fully transcends personal impulses for the greater good? Or is she recklessly deluded and blindly reaching for consolation in self-glorification? Is *Iphigenia in Aulis* an affirmation of the highest civic virtues or a bitter condemnation of the madness of war?

This Iphigenia is not Aeschylus's gagged and beseeching victim. Nor is she another Antigone. Her death takes place in a context of long-established social and divine sanctions; the play's moral perspective is never in doubt; and Antigone clearly understands her situation, her choice, and its consequences from first to last. Where *Antigone* presents order, *Iphigenia in Aulis* verges on—or plunges into—chaos.

Euripides, observes one critic, challenges his audiences with a "dance of provocation and retreat [that] keeps them . . . uncertain . . . [with a] constant shifting of moral viewpoint" (Michelini 88-89). On the one hand, Iphigenia rapturously shares in the Trojan War, the grand Pan-Hellenic enterprise of central importance to Greek culture and identity, a victory to be remembered with pride in the face of an impending defeat. On the other hand, the play implies that the war will be a pointless waste of lives: Helen is unworthy of the costs; and the sacrifice, says Clytemnestra, serves only to "buy with our best beloved / A creature most loathed and hated" (277, 1170-71).

Critics divide sharply over the meaning of Iphigenia's choice. John Wilkins observes that each of Euripides' six sacrificial victims is "universally admired" (184). Helene Foley cites critics who applaud Iphigenia's "exercise of free will and acquisition of knowledge. . . isolated moral

superiority to the world of the play . . . [and] movement from moral disorientation to a new idealism and determined action” (67n). Foley argues that Iphigenia “makes the sacrifice . . . psychologically acceptable . . . by visualizing it as marriage” (78). Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz finds that Iphigenia’s choice transforms the callow Achilles (44), and calls his admiration for her “a model for the audience” (53).

A traditional, positive reading often focuses on how Iphigenia arrives at Aulis as a child, absorbed in the personal and familial, and indifferent to the social and political. In the end, she leaves behind such feminine concerns for masculine ones, showing courage, resolution, concern for the public good, and the ability to take responsibility for herself. She now seeks *kleos* (fame or glory), normally earned with great achievements on the battlefield (*Women* 51). Readers who find that the play approves of Iphigenia’s choice tend to see her as the lone hero in the midst of rogues and fools; even if their failings undermine her dream for Greece, her courage is exemplary.

Yet the play provides equally compelling evidence that Iphigenia’s choice is a horrible mistake that demands an ironic reading. The *emotional* weight of events works powerfully against approval; the play is, after all, about killing one’s child. And much of it is spent deflating illusions about heroes from the *Iliad*. There is plenty of evidence that Iphigenia’s welcoming of her sacrifice results from “the one poor threadbare reason which has been offered for this irrational cruelty: . . . her father’s parting words” (Vellacott 176). Her enthusiasm endorses the weak and intimidated choice of Agamemnon, the angry selfishness of Menelaus (which even he is quick to reject), and the wild violence of the army—not to mention the self-indulgence of Helen and the capriciousness of Artemis. The same mad self-absorption we *may* find in all of them appears to possess Iphigenia: “I, savior of Greece, / Will win honor and my name shall be blessed” (290, 1384). She disregards her mother’s suffering and even attempts to further glorify herself by forbidding Clytemnestra to mourn for her or attend the sacrifice. In the end, the consequences of her sacrifice will be ten bloody years of the Trojan War and Clytemnestra’s vengeful killing of Agamemnon (which Iphigenia tries to prevent, urging “Do not hate *him*” [295, 1454]—leaving us to ask if that is good advice).

The characters around Iphigenia are only slightly less ambiguous. The men’s flaws are relatively obvious: Agamemnon and Menelaus may *speak* of patriotic necessity, but their motives consistently arise from appetite, not principles. Menelaus says his brother’s (temporary) decision to spare Iphigenia “brings evil and disaster to all Greece” (228, 308), yet he admits being driven by “My own desire” (230, 329)—what Agamemnon calls his “lust . . . to hold a lovely woman / In [his] arms” (233, 386). Agamemnon may be no better. The stranded fleet is not a national calamity or a strategic setback, but a personal defeat that makes his leadership irrelevant. Yet each man deplores and vehemently rejects the sacrifice at some point, shows some awareness that a larger good than his own is at stake, and has an honored place in Greek culture.

Achilles is petty and fussy about his reputation, yet he offers to save Iphigenia at the risk of his life. The Greek army initially appears splendid to the chorus of young women, who gawk like tourists, but we see them as rabble whom “Some god has driven mad” (234, 412). Even Achilles’ Myrmidons wind up threatening to kill him if he interferes with the sacrifice (286, 1350-53). In the end, Agamemnon’s hand appears to be forced by the worst elements of the army: mob anger, the ambitious cunning of Odysseus, and the threat of murderous violence. Yet he speaks movingly about his situation: “Greece lays upon me / This sacrifice of you beyond all will / Of mine. We are weak and of no account / Before this fated thing” (282, 1269-72).

The greatest challenge to Iphigenia’s choice comes from the otherwise infamous Clytemnestra, the one constant opponent of the sacrifice. D. J. Conacher criticizes her for being “as selfish as . . . Agamemnon” (250), and Foley speaks dismissively of Clytemnestra’s “narrow

and bourgeois point of view” (67). However, such criticisms miss the mark in at least two ways: Clytemnestra cares about Iphigenia’s loss as well as her own, and a parent’s loss of a child, certainly within this play, is not minor but terrible, deserving attention, compassion, and respect. The horror felt by Clytemnestra and Agamemnon is more prominent and more disturbing than Iphigenia’s own shock. What’s more, in a play in which characters mask personal motives with noble pretense, Clytemnestra is consistently honest and direct about her concerns. Thus, her horrified disapproval and anguish raise difficult questions about Iphigenia’s patriotic zeal.

In a play where radical revisions happen rapidly, even recklessly, only Clytemnestra remains true to her values. And yet the vitality of Iphigenia’s words and the purity of her motives seem to point to a higher, nobler, better view of life than Clytemnestra can conceive of. Students—like any other readers—can be casual about some ambiguities in the play, such as whether Agamemnon is sincere in his final speech about duty to Greece. But too much is at stake with Iphigenia’s life for them to remain indifferent about her choice. *Iphigenia in Aulis* may horrify or inspire a reader. We may be infuriated or reassured by what happens. Iphigenia may transform a necessity into a personal affirmation, or she may blindly surrender to annihilation through a pathetic misunderstanding. By having our students read this play, think about it, discuss what they find there, take a stand, and then justify it, we can help them learn to think about situations in which the right and wrong are not simple or obvious or certain. Furthermore, we can help them to think about death in support of war, which, in the end, is what the play is really about.

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