

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Iphigenia in Aulis 408-406 B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview. *Iphigenia in Aulis* was the last play composed by Euripides, probably in 406 B.C.E., the year of his death; added to which we note that the play is generally considered to be only partially by Euripides—the very end, ll. 2040 ff., having been written by some other hand, and other parts of the play arguably not by Euripides. It is to be noted, though, that the theme, style, and perspective are on the whole authentically Euripidean. There is a familiar questioning of the gods, concern with women's lives, a great deal of tense melodrama, and archaic riffs on the theme of the sacrificial maiden.

Characters

Agamemnon.	Leader of the Greeks against Troy.
Old Man.	Clytemnestra's slave; attendant on Agamemnon.
Chorus.	Young women of Chalkis.
Menelaus.	Brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen.
First messenger.	Leader of first escort for Clytemnestra.
Clytemnestra.	Queen of Mycenae.
Iphigenia.	Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.
Orestes.	Infant son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon
Achilles.	Hero of the Trojan War.

Story.

Stalled. The tale evolves around Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces against Troy. Beached and without favoring wind, en route in Euboea, off the Greek mainland, Agamemnon is told by the prophet Kalchas that he must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, before the winds will blow and the fleet will move. (The jealousy of Artemis is behind this.) While his sailors grow increasingly impatient, for action with their expedition, Agamemnon must confront the desperate requirement that he sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia.

Conflict. A terrible fight erupts, between Achilles, whose role is now to protect the Iphigenia he has been sent to marry and Agamemnon, who is reluctantly proceeding with plans to sacrifice his daughter, while trying to conceal the dreadful truth from his wife. Agamemnon attempts both to divert the blame onto his soldiers, and to diffuse the blame onto Menelaus, whose wife is responsible for the entire mess.

Compromise. At last, Agamemnon agrees to the move by which the fleet will be freed, and the demands of the goddess Artemis will be satisfied, so that the winds can blow. It is at this point in the text, when Iphigenia is being taken away to be sacrificed, that the text of Euripides is said to have been written by someone else.

Conclusion. The conclusion of the play, by whomever, seems dedicated to satisfying the demands of Artemis, who is benefitting from the slowing of the winds, and the advance of the fleet. We accept that Euripides is above all raising the question of whether any death is warranted by war. One might say that the playwright leaves a final tone of skepticism with the audience, a tone which made him unable to cheer on the progress of the fleet, or to mimic fashionable statements about Menelaus, who puts his own justification before the court of public opinion, which has unanimously expressed its exhaustion with war.

Themes

Coincidence. One event on which the present narrative depends, results from Agamemnon's effort to rethink the invitation to his wife and daughter, to join the Greek camp at Aulis. Agamemnon sends a sealed message to his wife, by courier chariot, telling her to cancel her trip. By pure coincidence the message is intercepted by Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, who rips open the seal of the letter, and discovers that Agamemnon intends to avoid sacrifice, and let the fleet molder at Aulis. (This burns Menelaos because he wants punishment for the Trojans, who have stolen his wife.)

Heroism. If there is any heroism in the play, as the sceptical Euripides sees it, it is that of Iphigenia, who intervenes, in the prolonged spat about whether she should be sacrificed, to offer herself for the supreme sacrifice. She opts for a glorious place in history, rather than a bloody and compromised death in the midst of secular struggles.

Cowardice. Neither Agamemnon nor Menelaos has a reputation for bravery: the former tends to withdraw before a divine hero like Achilles, while the latter is daunted by Trojan power, especially on the famous occasion of his cuckoldry. In the present play Menelaos is driven by fear that the Greek navy will stall, and he will never get his wife back.

Miracle. Euripides solves the painful issue of sacrifice by the substitution of a deer for Iphigenia, on the field of sacrifice at Aulis. (Narratively we will next see Iphigenia among the Taurians, herself a priestess of sacrifice.) Given that *Iphigenia at Aulis* was Euripides' last play—which he probably did not realize—it makes sense that he (if it was he who wrote the last part) was happy to resolve the young lady's painful life-end with a transcendent intervention.

Character Analysis

Iphigenia The main character is Iphigenia, who, though she is young and undeveloped, assumes the central role in the drama, for her chance victimhood and for her startlingly mature response to it. Iphigenia is little more than a pawn in the god network that opens when her father, Agamemnon, kills a deer sacred to Artemis. It is Artemis' revenge, for this act, that leads to the would be sacrifice of Iphigenia. Entrapped in this vengeance, which only her own eventual replacement by a deer will mitigate, Iphigenia makes the bold proposal that she should herself be sacrificed, rather than become the expedition-spoiling bone of contention between Agamemnon and Achilles. In the end Euripides finds Iphigenia a rich figure for narrative development. Of all his female characters, this girl to womanhood personage is arguably the most roundedly human.

Loving. When Clytemnestra and Iphigenia arrive in Aulis, it is the daughter who passionately flings herself into the arms of daddy. She begs her mom's acceptance of this impetuosity.

Learning. After a little conversation with Dad, Iphigenia begins to realize that Agamemnon is speaking mysteriously of being apart from her. We follow the girl's mind as she comes closer to sensing why she has been brought to Aulis.

Suppliant. As she grows clear, about her father's intentions for her, Iphigenia begins to beg for mercy and consolation. She throws herself at her father's knees.

Decision. As she becomes clear on her fate, Iphigenia makes the decision to die, be sacrificed, free herself from the mundane squabbling that is bringing Agamemnon, Achilles, and the Greek fleet into deadly conflict.

Freedom. Iphigenia decides to reject burial, and to let her spirit rejoin the gods, on her death. She was consigned to her destiny by Artemis, and she will return to 'heaven' directly.

Parallels. One of the classics of world thinking is the Hebrew/Islamic/Christian recounting of Abraham's 'sacrifice' of his son, Isaac. This tale, which narrates a supreme test of faith, intersects with the readiness of Iphigenia to accept her fate—although no figure, on the Greek side, reaches to a risk taking equal to Abraham's. Supplication is frequent in Greco Near Eastern literature: one thinks of a great example like

Priam, begging Achilles for the body of his son, Hector. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus prostrates himself before Arete, at the court of the Phaeacians, to beg for her kindness. In modern Christian culture *The Book of Common Prayer*, a mid-sixteenth century Anglican prayer book, channels Christian communal supplication; its prose style is exemplary.

Discussion questions

Euripides is often characterized as a new spirit and modern voice in Athenian literature. He is particularly credited with his sensitivity to women's lives and minds, in a period which was starkly macho, in anything having to do with affairs of the public world. How wide a range of women was Euripides sensitive to? Do you see traits in common to a trio of his women, say Medea, Iphigenia, and Hecuba?

How does the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, in the *Iphigenia*, compare to that between the two characters in the *Iliad*? Does Agamemnon preserve the same lack of social adroitness in the drama, that he showed in conflict with Achilles in the *Iliad*?

Do you detect a politics in Euripides' drama? Are there signs throughout this work of the Peloponnesian War struggle, which is raging at the time Euripides writes? What attitude does Euripides develop, toward war in general?