

IPHIGENEIA AT AULIS

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Euripides continued to evoke conflicting judgments by his writings to the end of his life. Whereas *The Bacchantes* is an acknowledged masterpiece, *Iphigeneia at Aulis* has been variously evaluated. The normally judicious Kitto called it "thoroughly second-rate."¹ By contrast Patin termed it "one of the masterworks of the Greek stage, its author's most perfect piece," Rivier saw it as a key-play, and Croiset claimed that in no play did Euripides show himself a finer interpreter of the world around him.² The fact is that if we seek to apply to *Iphigeneia* the critical yardsticks apposite to *The Oresteia*, *King Oedipus*, or even *The Bacchantes* we shall be disappointed. The critic who called it the favorite Greek tragedy of those who do not appreciate Greek tragedy has some truth behind his epigram. For *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is a creative play of a new type. In structure it is melodrama, and exciting beyond any other Greek play. In earlier melodramatic essays, *Helen* and *Iphigeneia among the Taurians*, the play is built on the blueprint of other tragedies, with recognition-scene and messenger's speech at the climactic points of a rising graph of excitement. Here the excitement is present from the first; episode follows episode, as it were upon the same level. But whereas in most melodramas the concentration on action and event turns the characters into puppets, here they are people in their own right. And whereas in most melodramas the need for fast movement leads to the playing down of language, which becomes hackneyed and bathetic, here the poetry is

¹ H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*² (London 1950) 366.

² Patin, *Euripide* (Paris 1894) 1.1; A. Rivier, *Essai sur la tragique d'Euripide* (Lausanne 1944) 76 ff.; M. Croiset, *Histoire de la littérature grecque*² 3 (Paris 1899) 302.

glorious. It is a modern play, with modern appeal, as the New York revival of 1967 showed; in the context of the late fifth century it must seem highly original.

It was, however, unfinished by Euripides at his death; of this there is no doubt. We are told by a scholiast to Aristophanes that it was presented after his death by his son, also called Euripides. Parts of the play show signs of reworking, and we may deduce that the young man patched it, and to some extent botched it.

The problems begin with the opening scene. Lines 1-48 are a dialogue in anapaests between Agamemnon and an old slave; lines 49-114 are a monologue by Agamemnon; at line 115 the anapaests resume. This is almost impossible. The last ten lines of Agamemnon's monologue are addressed to the slave, who therefore must be on stage; yet, in the succeeding anapaests he asks questions which are otiose if he has heard the monologue. Further, the interruption of the anapaestic dialogue is awkward and without parallel. No solution of rearrangement or deletion solves all the problems. The probable explanation is that Euripides originally wrote a typical prologue setting the scene, followed by a scene in anapaests between Agamemnon and his old slave. He then thought that it would be exciting, as he had done in *Andromeda*, to begin the play with anapaests—and indeed it is—and wrote an alternative beginning. He had not chosen between these alternatives, or even fully fashioned them, when he died. His executors were confronted with both; both were from the master hand; both must go on.

If this is right, the original monologue set the scene in the characteristic deliberation of a Euripidean prologue. Helen had many suitors; they all swore to defend the man who won her. Menelaus won her. Paris arrived with his eastern finery (a mild political reference, for the Persians had come back into Greek politics, and Athenians and Spartans alike were feeling the magnetic temptations of Persian gold). Helen and Paris fell in love, and he abducted her. Menelaus behaved like someone stung by a swarm of bees. The army assembled at Aulis, and Agamemnon was made commander-in-chief; then for want of sailing-weather Calchas the seer told him to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia. Agamemnon gave orders to cancel the expedition, but Menelaus pleaded with him. He wrote a letter to his wife telling her

to send Iphigeneia to marry Achilles, laying on the latter's charms so thickly that Euripides has to invent a word for the process (*ekgaouroumenos*, 101). Now he is regretting his action and has decided to send a second letter canceling the first. This is a good, honest, straightforward, craftsmanlike prologue. It sets the scene clearly. It contains an amusing picture of Menelaus. It reveals Agamemnon as inclined to blow hot and cold, and Achilles as a man whose virtues are capable of exaggeration.

There is nothing wrong with this until we look at the alternative. In place of the leisurely iambs we have scurrying anapaests. There is a sense of urgency, of excitement. There is a beautiful evocation of the night-scene, with Sirius and the Pleiades overhead, and the winds' silences (an unparalleled plural, 10); the tranquillity contrasts powerfully with the tortured anxiety of the king, as Vergil saw, and borrowed the device in depicting his Dido (*Aen.* 4.522). There is fine character-drawing: the blunt vigor of the old slave, the wearied emptiness of the king as he seals and unseals his letter. The difficulties of a king, some from men, some from gods, are gloomily retailed by Agamemnon. There is no explicit reference to an offense against Artemis; this aspect of the traditional myth is not contained in Euripides' play. But the gods are holding up the fleet, and men will not let Agamemnon spare his daughter. The old man's rebuke to the king is full of irony: "Atreus did not father you to enjoy unmixed happiness, Agamemnon" (29). No, indeed; we are being reminded of the traditional curse on the house of Atreus.

It is not possible here to give a detailed analysis of each scene of the play. It shows us characters in the grip of *tyché*. *Tychê* is the keyword. It comes at line 56, line 8 of the monologue with which Euripides originally began the play. After the first picture of Agamemnon we see Menelaus in self-pity, and when the Messenger has broken into mid-line with the news of Iphigeneia's coming, Agamemnon says grimly "Everything will turn out well as *tyché* takes her course" (441). Menelaus, still without scruple, turns from injured pride to family solidarity; Kitto, unkindly but not unjustly, says that he changes what we have to call his mind. It is now Agamemnon who feels he must go through with the sacrifice. The chorus, speaking in character, not with Euripides' thought, sings of married love as woman's

fulfilment. In the marvelous confrontation of Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra with Agamemnon, *tyché* returns (714-19):

Clyt: Will Achilles take your daughter and mine to Phthia?

Agam: He who claims her will see to that.

Clyt: May they have good *tyché* (εὐτυχοίτην). On what day is the marriage to be?

Agam: Full moon—that is good *tyché* (εὐτυχής).

Clyt: Have you offered preliminary sacrifice to the goddess?

Agam: I am going to. We are engaged on that *tyché*.

Clytemnestra, still in her twenties, refuses to return to Argos. In her beauty Helen's sister meets Achilles and he amusingly misunderstands her words. The note of *tyché* is repeated by the old servant who spills the beans (858, 864, 893 ἔτυχε), as again by Achilles, when with ruthless unintention he dissects himself, but offers to save the girl. "Bless you," says Clytemnestra, "for helping those whose *tyché* is bad" (δυστυχοῦντας, 1008). She adds the word "continuously." It has been placed by the poet with masterly ambiguity. Achilles will not have continuous blessing, nor will he go through with his help. The one thing which will be continuous is the one thing Clytemnestra does not mean, the ill-fortune. Agamemnon faces Clytemnestra, his mask is stripped, he invokes *tyché* (1136), but he will not give way. Iphigeneia, barely in her teens, at first breaks down, then when Achilles enters, falls back ashamed by the ill *tyché* (τὸ δυστυχές) of her marriage (1342), then sacrifices her life for Greece. The chorus says, "You play your part nobly; *tyché* is at fault" (1402). Achilles says, "I would be lucky to marry you, if *tyché* permitted (τύχοιμι, 1404). The chorus describe her as blessed by *tyché* (εὐτυχοῦσα, 1446), and pray for an outcome blessed by *tyché* (εὐτυχεῖ πότμω, 1523).

Then a Messenger comes in with news of the sacrifice. It is possible that the Messenger's speech is authentic at the beginning, as he tells how Iphigeneia prays that the people may be blessed by *tyché* (εὐτυχεῖν τε, 1557), but the last part with the sacrifice of the substitute deer and the favorable treatment of Calchas is plainly not by Euripides, and a quotation preserved, which does not appear in our text, suggests that Euripides planned a rather different ending. What this was, it is hard to be sure, but it almost certainly contained an appearance of a

divinity (here Artemis) in judgment, as in *Electra*, possibly a more devastating judgment than we can imagine.

The sheer theatricality of the play is superb. It has a splendid opening with the urgent message by night. It thus opens on the note of hope, and thereafter fluctuates between hope and despair. As Menelaus intercepts the message hope fades. Then in the quarrel between the brothers we have continually the hope that Agamemnon may persuade Menelaus. With the arrival of the Messenger hope goes, and it is a brilliant stroke of drama to give it an illusory flicker as Menelaus is persuaded too late. Now comes the scene between Iphigeneia and her father, and hope soars as we see the love between them and sags as we find it to be ineffectual. The most that Agamemnon can do is to try to spare Clytemnestra—or himself—by sending her back to Argos. In this latter half of the scene, hope—but now in Agamemnon, directed to this limited end—rises again and falls. But hope is not extinguished on the deeper issue. From the confrontation of Achilles and Clytemnestra comes hope. Clytemnestra is to challenge Agamemnon. With Iphigeneia she does so, Agamemnon is inflexible, and hope changes to despair. Still there is Achilles; he will face the assembly; and again hope rises, and again it is dashed to the ground. Yet Achilles will fight; hope staggers manfully up; until Iphigeneia by her sacrifice puts the matter beyond hope and despair.

Iphigeneia then provides the solution, and in so doing she reasons in a way counter to everything Euripides stood for. He did not believe that one man is worthier than ten thousand women or that Asiatics are naturally slaves. Shades of Medea! This is no deathbed recantation of his life's work. It is tempting to suppose irony in view of the pretentious Hellenism of the Macedonian court. Yet Iphigeneia is no tongue-in-cheek creation. She goes on (1416–20):

I say this with no—NO—reservations:
Helen has done enough by her beauty to cause
quarrels and bloodshed among men. Stranger—

she is addressing Achilles—

do not die for me or put others to death.
Let me save Greece if I may.

There is no irony there. Of course it is true that Iphigeneia is Agamemnon's child, physically and spiritually, and we may expect her to share his prejudices, and Euripides has prepared us for this. But there is more to it than that. What Euripides is doing is showing that a girl with all the prejudices of Athenian womanhood can still be a heroine. His most dominant women, Medea, Phaedra, Hecabe, all except the pathological Electra, have been non-Greek. Here is a typical Athenian woman, and she still dominates the scene. This is not Pericles' injunction to the women of Athens, that their greatest glory was to be least talked about by men for praise or blame (Thuc. 2.44); on the contrary, the note of glory in fame is sounded by the chorus (1504). But it is Periclean woman attaining a glory which prejudiced males arrogated to themselves.

Behind all stands *tyché*. It is highly probable that Thucydides was in Macedon when Euripides was writing the play; his name is linked with that of Archelaus,³ and in one tradition he wrote the poet's epitaph.⁴ Resemblances between the thought of Euripides and the thought of Thucydides are extensive, and many of them may be attributed to a common stock of thought on which both were drawing.⁵ This suffices to explain some of the parallels even in this play. Thus Agamemnon's words in praise of the sheltered life and the general sense of the dangers which surround power (16-27) resemble the Athenian defence of their empire (Thuc. 1.72). The contrast between the honest man's worth and the unscrupulous malaise of the average politician (527) recalls some words of Pericles (Thuc. 2.65). The justification of an apparently irreligious action in terms of military necessity (394-95) is used by the Athenians in favor of their fortifying Apollo's precinct at Delium (Thuc. 4.97-98). The importance of training to the achievement of excellence (*areté*, 558-72) is a commonplace which Thucydides set in Spartan mouths (e.g. 1.84.4). But there is more to it than this. It is not too much to say that Thucydides' total analysis of history is in terms of the interaction between the constant factor of human nature and the variable factor represented by *tyché*. This is the precise theme of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, and we may

³ Marcellinus, *Vit. Thuc.* 29-30.

⁴ *Anth. Pal.* 7.65, Athenaeus 5.187B, *Vit. Eur.* 40.

⁵ J. H. Finley, Jr., "Euripides and Thucydides," *HSCP* 49 (1938) 23 ff.

legitimately infer that it was suggested to Euripides by his contact with Thucydides. It is tempting to wonder whether there may not have been a two-way traffic, whether the skeletonic Melian dialogue may not be a late addition suggested by the passionate rejection of Athenian policy at Melos by Euripides, evidenced in *The Women of Troy*. John H. Finley (above, note 5) has pointed out an important difference in that Thucydides sets out the politics which caused the massacre at Melos, whereas Euripides elaborates the emotions suggested by the event. But, as he also says, both share the same essential attitude towards the event; both regard it as a symbol of the increasing brutalization of the Greek mind, and both see that disaster awaits the victors. "That winter the Athenians made ready with an expedition greater than ever before to sail against Sicily and subjugate it" (Thuc. 6.1); our present book division, which is not the original one,⁶ cuts across the psychological continuity. However this may be, *tyché* controls the action of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* in a highly Thucydidean manner, in Menelaus' interception of the old man, in the arrival of the Messenger just before Menelaus is persuaded, in the accidental encounter between Achilles and Clytemnestra, just as *tyché* dominates the speech. As for human nature, we meet, says Norwood, "five ordinary characters under the strain of extraordinary circumstances."⁷ Agamemnon is an ordinary, very ordinary, man, put into a position where he has to take decisions too big for him. Menelaus is an ordinary man, with the ordinary man's compromises, selfishness, and family interests. Clytemnestra is an ordinary woman, full, when unruffled, of a dignity which she sheds when ruffled. Achilles is an ordinary man, vain, self-centered, and courageous in defense of his own reputation. And Iphigeneia is an ordinary girl; this is the point. The others set off Iphigeneia. Euripides seems to be saying: "Here is human nature—you—the one constant factor in human affairs. Look at the compromising self-centered mess we make of human nature. If only we could keep the child's view." "Except you become as little children, you shall not enter even the kingdoms of this world."⁸

⁶ Marcellinus, *Vit. Thuc.* 58.

⁷ G. Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*⁴ (London 1948) 287.

⁸ This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in Boston in December 1967.