

Δόμων ἄγαλμα: **Virgin Sacrifice and Aesthetic Object**

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Scholars have examined the virgin sacrifices of Athenian tragedy extensively in recent years, exploring the connections between marriage and death, sacrifice and girls' initiations, and sacrifice and the psychology of war.¹ There is no agreement about whether the ritual background behind these sacrifices is the "ritual death" characteristic of life-cycle transitions, or genuine human sacrifice in the Greek past or imagination. This paper, however, is not concerned with the ritual significance of virgin sacrifice, but with a possible connection between the presentation of human sacrifice in tragedy and normal civic sacrificial practice. While no representation of human sacrifice entirely lacks moral ambiguity, some treatments, such as those of Euripides' *Erechtheus* and *Phoenissae*, present sacrifice as the exchange of one life for many and as the salvation of the city.² Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Hecuba*, by contrast, emphasize the moral evil in sacrifices of unmarried young women: audiences and readers may disagree about whether these sacrifices are necessary or inevitable, but cannot doubt that the poets emphasize their cruelty. Both victims are compared to works of art, and both victims lose clothing and are exposed before men. These details exaggerate a reality of civic life, since virgins were a decorative presence at sacrifices. Where a "bad" sacrifice replaces marriage, Aeschylus and Euripides thereby exploit the reality of maidens' service as basket-carriers. A voyeuristic element of everyday life is exaggerated so as to become explicit and disturbing. This excessive exposure of the virgin is an important part of the horror of human sacrifice.³ Since display of the virgin in normal ritual is based on the virgin's value as a precious object, the tragedians present virgins as analogous to luxury goods whose proper use is

¹See Lloyd-Jones 87–102; Seaford 87–95; Burkert 58–72; Henrichs 195–242; Foley 68–91; Dowden; Rabinowitz.

²Connelly argues that the Parthenon frieze portrays the procession preceding the sacrifice of the Erechtheids; it appears to be an unambiguous celebration of heroic courage and patriotism.

³On the erotic element in virgin sacrifice, see Burkert.

dedication to gods, and human sacrifice as a wasteful form of overconspicuous consumption that involves excessive display of the virgin's body.

Sacrificial rituals, and processions in particular, were a conspicuous exception to the rule that unmarried girls did not display themselves in public (as were other, less frequent, rituals). Not only the daughters of citizens, but those of metics as well, took part in the Panathenaic procession. A standard work points out to our students that old women did not have a function in the procession, since Greeks were insensitive to the beauty of old age.⁴ In fact, all mature women were absent. Despite the importance of women's rituals in Athens, at the public sacrifices and in the processions virgins were the only group of women (other than priestesses) with an official part to play. The virgin basket-carrier, on the other hand, was a frequent figure in the city cult. This may be explained in part because the rituals served as socialization, so that the role played by girls, who could symbolize their entire age-group, would parallel the very large part given to ephebes in Athenian state religion.⁵ Yet there were roles for the other ages of males which are lacking for women: Xenophon (*Smp.* 4.17) refers to the use of old men as *θαλλοφόροι*—carriers of olive-branches for Athena (in the Panathenaic procession) as proof that old age has its own standards of beauty. He can use this argument because Greeks assumed that beauty is essential to such religious spectacles: they served to delight the gods aesthetically exactly as they delighted their human audiences. Old men were generally not regarded as any more beautiful than old women, and the chorus of Aristophanes *V.* 542–43 complains of being called *θαλλοφόροι* in mockery; yet old men had a place in the procession, as old women did not. Among women, only virgins were suitable for such display.

The virgin basket-carrier thus invited the male gaze, while in everyday life—however visible girls might actually be—they were not on display.⁶ Men could see women in many ritual contexts, so that these occasions are a standard literary device for beginning a love-story. Where women were participants in funerals or spectators at festivals, however, the erotic possibilities were an accident. Virgins, on the other hand, advertised themselves as potential brides. Statues of *korai* depicted the ideal model of the girl on display in a ritual

⁴Parke 44.

⁵Brelich 279–90.

⁶See Cohen 1989: 3–15 and 1991: 146–68, as well as Just 111–14, on possible complexities of the norms governing the seclusion of women.

context.⁷ Aristophanes' Dicaeopolis, conducting a phallic procession with his daughter as *κνηφόρος*, warns her against theft of her jewelry, advises her to look as if she'd eaten pungent herbs, and fantasizes about the good fortune of her husband-to-be (*Ach.* 237ff.).

The display was an important source of honor to the girl and to her family. The old women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* recall their participation in a series of rituals as reason for them to give good advice to the city, since the city "brought me up in splendid luxury," *χλιδῶσαν ἀγλαῶς ἔθρεψέ με* (640). The final ritual in the list is carrying the basket in a sacrificial procession, *κνηφόρου ποτ' οὔσα παῖς καλὴ ἔχουσ' ἰσχάδων ὀρμαθόν*, "I carried a basket once when I was a lovely girl, wearing a necklace of figs" (646–47). While service as *Arrephoros* and *Aletris* are marked by age, at seven and ten, the time of playing the bear at Brauron is marked only as later than these (the problem of the actual age of the "bears" is not important here). The mention of service as a basket-carrier, on the other hand, brings with it recollection of youthful beauty and a note of nostalgia marked by *ποτ'*. Statues and inscriptions sometimes commemorate a girl's service.⁸ Denial of the privilege could be a mortal insult; according to Thucydides (6.556.1), Harmodius and Aristogeiton's conspiracy against Hippias was prompted by the tyrant's forbidding Aristogeiton's sister to serve as basket-carrier "in some procession," on the grounds that she was "undeserving"—presumably that her chastity was suspect.⁹ For the elite, this opportunity to win prestige by displaying their daughters must have been valuable. In a society so marked by competitiveness and concern for prestige, the need to conceal and not boast of any merit or prized possession was a paradox.

The virgin was an ephemeral being. A man had to hope that his daughter would be his only briefly.¹⁰ The period between puberty, when a girl became a *parthenos* instead of a child, and marriage, which made her a *parthenos* no longer, was very brief. During this brief time, maidens were most desirable. Hence the procession was an important event, for it released the tension between the need to conceal the virgin and hide her desirability and her very

⁷Schneider 31–37, especially 33 on statues as exemplars, and 35 on the "social contradiction" of women as sources of prestige.

⁸For the variety of cults including a *κνηφόρος*, and dedications which reveal the family's pride, see Schelp 18–21.

⁹Lavelle 318–31.

¹⁰Girls who die before marriage may, of course, receive funeral monuments. See Redfield 190.

real value, which cried out for conspicuous display. The potential wife was a precious object for exchange, and the procession offered a safe way to show her.¹¹ The similarity between a virgin daughter and a fine *peplos* or a splendid statue may help explain why myths of human sacrifice have maidens as the preferred victims. Many other figures could have been marginal and liminal, but only daughters were simultaneously inessential and precious.¹²

Still, there was a dangerous side to the display. Even as it emphasized the maiden's chastity, it invited an aesthetic and erotic male gaze that was potentially dangerous. In a way, it foreshadowed the moment of unveiling, the ἀνακαλυπτήριον at the wedding, where the bride was revealed not only to the bridegroom but to the guests. To place the display of the virgin basket-carrier beside her unveiling at marriage brings out the ambiguity of the ritual appearance, for the wedding ritual seems to imply that the bride has never been seen before.¹³ Mythology associates service as basket-carrier with rape, as it does the dance for Artemis.¹⁴ In correct ritual, the clothed virgin's beauty honored the gods and delighted men before that beauty was given its final, appropriate use in marriage. A basket-carrier was shown but also protected. Her aesthetic value was displayed and invited the male to look, but the sacral occasion maintained a controlling decorum. Ultimately, the virgin was to be married and seen only by her husband.

In the crucial moment of his decision to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, the Agamemnon of Aeschylus' tragedy expresses his reluctance by calling her his "child," τέκνον, and then, in apposition, "the ornament of my house," δόμων ἄγαλμα (208). By itself, the word ἄγαλμα, which is often used of human beings, does not commodify Iphigenia. It does tend in that direction, however. When one person is the ἄγαλμα of another, the ἄγαλμα functions as a possession which gives delight to its possessor because others admire it.

¹¹Cf. Vernant 61: "The practice of endogamy, the acceptance as son-in-law of the solitary exile, and the choice of the husband being left to the daughter are three instances that reflect the ambiguity of the status of the woman in any system of matrimonial exchange in which the woman's role is that of a precious possession."

¹²Marginality and liminality as the features of the sacrificial victim are especially stressed in the theory of Girard 269–73, but are otherwise widely recognized; see, e.g., Henrichs 233: "the ideal human victims were children or foreigners, in other words social groups which were dispensable and unprotected by the law." Kearns, especially 337, argues that the king's daughters are both marginal and central.

¹³Cf. Sissa 97–99: marriage, rather than sexual activity as such, ends virginity because it is public.

¹⁴On the age, iconography, and connotations of basket-carriers, see Sourvinou-Inwood 54–57 and 94–99 (notes 253–73).

For example, at *S. Ant.* 703–4, a father with a good reputation is an ἄγαλμα for his son, and vice versa, because each receives prestige from the connection, while Dionysus is the ἄγαλμα of Semele at 1115, for she would be an ordinary woman were she not his mother. Hence the word implies display, for an ἄγαλμα cannot fulfill its function if nobody sees it. Indeed, the ἄγαλμα is often an object of talismanic power, associated with divinely-given authority.¹⁵ In normal use, there is nothing wrong in comparing a child to such a precious object. The word is obviously not confined to unmarried daughters, and it is not exclusive: a child who glories in how his father's good repute reflects on himself may also love and respect his father for many other reasons. When Agamemnon deliberates, though, this phrase is the only expansion of τέκνον.

The chorus assimilates Iphigenia to a beautiful object and to an animal at the same time. Muzzled to keep her from uttering ill-omened screams, she is said to be “beautiful as in a picture,” πρέπουσα ὡς ἐν γράφαις (242), and wishing but unable to speak. By emphasizing Iphigenia's pleas (228), her piteous looks, and her frustrated desire to speak after she is gagged, the chorus does not completely reduce her to an object, yet in comparing her to a picture it tends to commodify her, just as Agamemnon had done.

The act of sacrifice involves excessive display of the virginal body. In many tragic passages of voluntary, sacrificial, or quasi-sacrificial death, the preparation of the corpse takes place proleptically, as the victim is bathed, clothed, and adorned. Such preparation may be dignified, as when Alcestis and the Oedipus of *OC* prepare themselves for death, or horrifying, as when Clytemnestra almost parodies the ritual by covering Agamemnon in cloth before killing him.¹⁶ Iphigenia, though, is said to “pour her saffron robes to the ground,” κρόκου βαφὰς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα (239). In the most plausible explanation of this difficult passage, her saffron robes slip and her body is exposed as she is lifted over the altar. This exposure echoes the shedding of the saffron tunics worn by the girls who acted the bear in the cult of Artemis Brauronia.¹⁷ In the ritual, the transition from wearing the saffron clothing to

¹⁵Gernet gives various examples.

¹⁶There is a rich discussion in Seaford.

¹⁷So Sourvinou-Inwood 132–33. Both the lines of Aeschylus and the “shedding” of clothing at the Brauronia are problematic; Stinton 11 proposes the conjecture καὶ χέουσα τὸν κροκωτὸν ἄρκτος ἢ Βραυρωνίῳ for καταχέουσα R, κατέχουσα G, usually emended after Ellebodus to κατ' ἔχουσα at *Lys.* 645. The conjecture, however, depends partly on the parallel from Aeschylus, as well as on the vase-paintings, which show both clothed and naked “bears.” Cf. Henderson ad loc. But there is also controversy as to

nakedness is part of the transition from girlhood to acculturated potential wife, and the echo emphasizes how Agamemnon deprives his daughter of both her correct place in civic ritual and of her marriage. The strongest alternative understanding of the lines would make the cloth a wedding veil, which Iphigenia throws off. Since the veil signifies the maiden's chastity, and is properly removed only at the ἀνακαλυπτήριον, removing it constitutes exposure as clearly as exposure of the rest of the body.¹⁸

The chorus concludes its description of the event by recalling how Iphigenia had been accustomed to sing a paean to accompany the third libation at her father's symposia:

...ἐπεὶ πολλάκις
πατὴρ κατ' ἀνδρῶνας εὐτραπέζους
ἔμελψεν, ἀγνῶι δ' ἀταύρωτος αὐδᾷ πατρός
φίλου τριτόσπονδον εὐποτμον παι-
ῶνα φίλως ἐτίμα. (242–47)

She sang by the well-filled tables in her father's hall, and a virgin with pure voice she lovingly honored the paean for her loving father's well-fated third libation.¹⁹

Of course, virgin girls did not sing at their fathers' parties in Aeschylus' time; for a woman to be present at a symposium was a strong indication that she was

Iphigenia's "shedding" her clothing. The interpreter must also decide what is meant in the preceding lines. Fraenkel *ad loc.* argues that πέπλοισι περιπετῇ means only "with her robes wrapped around her," and is not part of the command. Maas sees it as indicating the situation of Brit. Mus. 1897.7–22.2, the Timiades Painter's illustration of the sacrifice of Polyxena, where her robes are wrapped around her so that she cannot move her limbs. I agree, taking it as part of the command; but the command is not successfully executed, since the robes slip.

Fraenkel, citing *Il.* 5.734–35, argues that Iphigenia actually escapes from the hold of her captors and kneels naked in supplication, whereas Lloyd-Jones 132–35 calls this idea "an unnecessary piece of exhibitionism," and argues that the drapery accidentally slips as she is lifted; it is not entirely clear whether he thinks the slipping results in exposure or not. Denniston and Page *ad loc.*, on the other hand, argue vigorously that the clothing droops toward the ground but Iphigenia is not uncovered at all. Then it is hard to see what κρόκου βαφῆς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα could mean—surely not blood or tears. There is thus a certain circularity if we use Aeschylus to introduce χέουσα into Aristophanes and Aristophanes to argue for the interpretation of Aeschylus. But circular though the process may be, it gives excellent sense in both passages.

¹⁸Armstrong and Ratchford provide a vigorous argument in support of this interpretation.

¹⁹The translation is that of Lloyd-Jones 1970.

not respectable.²⁰ No such custom appears in the Homeric poems either. So, while it is certainly not impossible that an earlier poet than Aeschylus invented this as a custom of the heroic age, the greatest likelihood is that he imagined it himself. What is created here is an occasion for pious display. It is essential for the pathos of the scene that Iphigenia actually knows—or at least can recognize—the men who are preparing to kill her, and that they know her. For this reason, a more intimate variant of the ritual for virgin display has been devised—one which also evokes the recurring themes of banquet and libation that will be important in the play. Only because she has previously been displayed to these men does she attempt to speak to them, implying, perhaps, not so much that she would try to win their pity because she knows them as that by the rules of propriety she would be allowed to address them because she has seen them before. Her pathos is made all the greater through the suggestion that she would not have tried to speak to strangers even to plead for her life. The closer intimacy of the imagined display possibly removes from it the sense of public exposure present in civic ritual, so that Aeschylus can imply simultaneously that Iphigenia's sacrifice is her first and last appearance in the civic world and that she is familiar with the Greek leaders who murder her. In any case, the detail emphasizes the difference between the earlier, correct ritual display and the present twisted ritual.

The Carpet Scene develops the association of the sacrificed virgin with valuable, and wasted, property; in walking on the tapestries Agamemnon could almost be said to repeat the sacrifice itself. This is, of course, only one of the significances of the scene. However, one particular thematic element, emphasized in the famous discussion of John Jones, clearly restates a motif hinted at in the treatment of the sacrifice in the parados: walking on the textiles is a conspicuous and wanton destruction of luxury goods and hence a insult to the gods who gave wealth to the house. Clytemnestra convinces her husband in part by insisting that the wealth of the Atreids is as inexhaustible as the sea that had supplied the crimson dye.²¹

It is hard to separate precisely the different aspects of Agamemnon's offense. His victory in war, accomplished at the cost of many deaths of innocents, by itself subjects him to the curses of those who have suffered. Yet the sacrifice of his daughter is clearly the central act by which the audience and

²⁰See Fraenkel ad loc.

²¹On the importance of the "wealth" theme here, see Jones 85–88.

chorus judge him; the chorus recalls it just before his entrance, and, unlike the deaths of Trojans and other Greeks, it is in fact a motive for Clytemnestra. While the meditations of the chorus in the first and second stasima reflect on Greek and Trojan alike, Agamemnon himself is characterized primarily through the description of the sacrifice, so that those aspects of his actions that evoke the sacrifice are especially significant.

Clytemnestra asks Agamemnon, in a passage whose text and meaning are not entirely certain, whether he would have vowed such an act as the trampling of the tapestries to the gods in fear, and he replies that he would have, if an expert had told him to:

Κλ. ηὔξω θεοῖς δέισσας ἄν ὧδ' ἔρδειν τόδε;
 Αγ. εἴπερ τις εἰδώς γ' εὖ τόδ' ἐξεῖπεν τέλος.²² (933–34)

Cl. Would you in fear have vowed to perform this?
 Ag. If someone who really knew had declared this ritual.

Obviously the one who would know in such a situation would have to be a prophet, and the line can therefore hardly fail to recall the earlier occasion when Agamemnon listened to prophetic advice in a situation of fear. Indeed, the chorus in the parodos stressed that Agamemnon (unlike his Iliadic counterpart) did not “blame any prophet” when the need for the sacrifice was disclosed (186). No prophet, of course, has suggested walking on tapestries, so that the argument is irrelevant; it is also peculiar, because walking on tapestries in fulfillment of a vow makes no sense as a ritual behavior. An offering of textiles would be perfectly appropriate, of course. In the *Iliad*, for example, Helenus the prophet advises the Trojans, who are threatened by the attack of Diomedes, to offer the most splendid peplos the queen possesses to Athena. Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* repeatedly alludes to the tapestries as properly serving to honor the gods (922, 946). Walking on the tapestries therefore involves destroying objects that the gods might otherwise have received. Destroying them instead of presenting them is not ritually normal.²³ The peculiarity of the argument invites the audience to look for its wider function, and so to consider Agamemnon’s earlier response to prophetic advice.

²²See Fraenkel ad loc. West’s apparatus comments “versus obscuri; cf. 963 sq.”

²³Crane 117–36.

Sacrifice is normal and correct as a way of placating angry gods. Though they are more precious than animals, however, the use of human victims perverts sacrifice into impiety. Since a daughter has correct ritual functions and social functions, sacrificing her constitutes waste as well as impiety. The two acts of trampling and human sacrifice are thus mirror images of each other. Both Iphigenia and the tapestries are valuable objects that should be displayed, under appropriate conditions, for the pleasure of gods and men. Each should properly be given away by the possessor—the daughter in marriage, the textiles to the gods.

While the *parodos* assimilates Iphigenia to a beautiful object, then, the carpet scene associates her specifically with textiles. The power of this specific connection derives partly from ritual practice. Textiles were the proper gift to Artemis on behalf of girls who had been saved from the “hysteria” that threatened them at puberty—an illness for which the Hippocratic doctor recommends marriage and sexual intercourse (*Virg.* viii p. 468 13–14 Littré)—and are common in the inventories of dedications to Brauronian Artemis, whose cult marked an important stage in girls’ passage to adulthood at Athens.²⁴ Iphigenia is herself, of course, linked to this cult as the mythical first priestess, and according to Euripides’ *IT* she is to receive the clothing of women who die in childbirth:

...καὶ πέπλων
ἄγαλμά σοι θήσουσιν εὐπῆνους ὑφάς,
ἃς ἂν γυναῖκες ἐν τόκοις ψυχορραγεῖς
λίπωσ’ ἐν οἴκοις. (1464–67)

An ornament of robes (ἄγαλμα again!), they will dedicate to you
beautifully textured weavings, whichever ones women who breathe
their last in childbirth leave in their homes.

As representative young woman, Iphigenia might properly have woven and dedicated textiles, and, in real life, as cult figure she did in fact receive them as dedications. While other valuable objects could have served a similar symbolic function, the real-world association between Iphigenia and textiles makes their assimilation in the drama easier.

Agamemnon, then, abuses both daughter and textiles. Iphigenia was properly used as a ritual ornament to sing a paean, but she is not an animal

²⁴*IG II*² 1514, 1515, 1516, 1517, 1518, 1521–24, 1525, 1528. See Linders 1972.

suitable for sacrifice; the ornamental daughter is supposed to be displayed and then exchanged, not destroyed. The textiles are properly used as gifts to gods, and in this function they serve as a display of wealth as well as of piety, but when Agamemnon walks on them he wastefully spoils their beauty in an inappropriate display. Clytemnestra's own entrapment of Agamemnon forces him to re-enact the sacrifice and so probably increases her power over him. But the imagery cannot go only one way. If trampling the textiles is like the sacrifice of Iphigenia, then the sacrifice is also like the destruction of textiles. The comparison commodifies Iphigenia, making her murder a form of the abuse of valuable property, and also a mode of incorrect ritual behavior of the same kind as walking on a wall-hanging.²⁵

Iphigenia's sacrifice is therefore wrong, not because the identification of the girl with an object is wrong, but because it misuses the virgin as luxury object. Helen is also associated in the play with ornamentality and statues, but she is not an ornament. When she leaves Menelaus, her statues no longer please her husband—they are not equivalent to the woman herself:

εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν
ἔχθεται χάρις ἀνδρί. (416–17)

The beauty of lovely statues is hateful to her husband.

In their next song, the chorus in a fable compares her to a lion cub which a man raised as a pet: friendly while young because of its need for food, in adulthood it showed its inherent, ancestral nature and ravaged the house (717–36). In the case of Helen, distinctions are made between the woman herself and images of her, and between her real self and her appearance. The chorus also imagines that she came to Troy first as a mere ornament:

ἀκασκαῖον <δ'> ἄγαλμα πλούτου,
μαλθακὸν ὁμμάτων βέλος,
δηξίθυμον ἔρωτος ἄνθος. (741–43)

A gentle ornament of wealth, a soft shaft from the eyes, a heart-biting flower of desire.

²⁵From a modern point of view, Greek women were treated as commodities in marriage, and Medea's famous complaint (*Med.* 232–34) shows that this perspective was available to Euripides. More often, however, a marriage that maintains a woman's status is sharply distinguished from commodification in either enslavement or sacrifice. My emphasis on this difference makes my approach very different from that of Rabinowitz.

Helen, however, then reveals her truer self as a Fury (749). A mature erotic object, Helen is in reality utterly different from an image of her, unlike the virgin, who is not distinct from her appearance.

Polyxena's sacrifice in Euripides' *Hecuba* also presents the full thematic nexus of human sacrifice, exposure of the virginal body, voyeurism, and aestheticization. The episode seems deliberately to recall the sacrifice of Iphigenia, especially insofar as Achilles prevents the Greek ships from sailing until he is appeased by sacrifice.²⁶ Where Iphigenia is bound and gagged, Polyxena asks to be left free, and stresses that she will offer her neck bravely (549). Unlike Iphigenia, Polyxena has made her own decision to accept her death, and she controls her own exposure. Her actions at the sacrifice are as rhetorical as her speeches and invite interpretation as argument. Yet the meanings of her actions are not confined to what Polyxena, as a fictive character, could be imagined to intend. Her gestures invoke literary parallels that permit an audience to consider different contexts through which to interpret what she does.²⁷

Polyxena does not merely offer her neck, but exposes herself to the waist:

...λαβοῦσα πέπλους ἐξ ἄκρας ἐπωμίδος
ἔρρηξε λαγόνας ἐς μέσας παρ' ὀμφαλόν,
μαστούς τ' ἔδειξε στέρνα θ' ὡς ἀγάλματος
κάλλιστα, καὶ καθεῖσα πρὸς γαῖαν γόνυ
ἔλεξε πάντων τλημονέστατον λόγον·
'Ἴδού, τόδ' εἰ μὲν στέρνων, ὦ νεανία,
παίειν προθυμῇ, παῖσον, εἰ δ' ὑπ' αὐχένα
χρήξεις, πάρεστι λαιμός εὐπρεπῆς ὄδε. (558–65)

Taking her robes where they were pinned at the shoulder, she tore them to the middle of her flanks, by the navel, and revealed her breasts and her lovely upper torso, like a statue's, and putting her knee on the ground, she spoke the most pathetic speech: Behold, if you wish to strike my breast here, strike, or if you want to strike at the neck, here is my fine throat.

²⁶Kovacs 145 n. 58 points out that Achilles does not stop the winds. Instead Agamemnon at 898–901 tells us casually that “a god” is holding back the wind, so that Hecuba will have time for her vengeance. A favorable wind rises at the end of the play. The drama thus evokes *Agamemnon* without following it.

²⁷Michellini 160–62 argues that “the significance of this strange gesture is of greater import than its motivation.” Yet the audience can hardly fail to wonder about Polyxena's motives.

There is no place in ritual practice for striking the breast of a sacrificial victim, so that this exposure is unnecessary. As Clytemnestra spreads the tapestries in order to bring down envy, divine and human, upon Agamemnon, and, by persuading him to repeat on a symbolic level the sacrifice of his daughter, to recall divine anger at the murder, so Polyxena's offer to the Greeks of a ritually incorrect place to strike is itself a criticism of their practice.

It is the male observer-narrator, Talthybius, who compares the body to a statue, but Polyxena herself calls her throat "beautiful": she is, apparently, deliberately manipulating the aesthetic and voyeuristic elements in the ritual. After this deliberate self-display, as she dies she modestly, and implausibly, keeps her genitals covered:

...ἢ δὲ καὶ θνήσκουσ' ὁμῶς
πολλὴν πρόνοιαν εἶχεν εὐσχήμων πεσεῖν,
κρύπτουσ' ἃ κρύπτειν ὄμματ' ἀρσένων χρέων. (568–70)

Even in dying, she was very careful to fall decorously, hiding what should be hidden from the eyes of men.

There can therefore be no idea that this self-exposure indicates any lack of modesty.²⁸ Exposure of the female genitals would not be beautiful, but ugly and ridiculous, as the story of Iambe/Baubo indicates.²⁹ The character's care here is also the poet's, as he balances the excessive eroticism of the events with the dignity he gives Polyxena.

Polyxena's baring of her breasts, like her words, makes her courage known to all, and indeed makes it the center of the spectacle. Yet this display of her willingness to die does not need to take the form of offering her breast to the sword. Nicole Loraux has argued that Polyxena exposes the spot where a warrior is appropriately struck in battle, and so creates a comparison between sacrificial death and death in battle.³⁰ Yet if her gesture evokes the warrior's death, it dramatizes the distance between battle and sacrifice, for a warrior does not offer his breast to his enemy or remove his armor for the blow. The killer on the battlefield receives honor for killing because he accepts the risk of his own death, so the gesture also marks the lack of honor for Neoptolemus in killing a

²⁸Michellini 163–64 catalogues various critical discussions, to which add Segal 175–78.

²⁹See Richardson 213–17.

³⁰Loraux 58–60 sees Polyxena's gesture as evoking death in battle and as erotic in result, but not in intention.

defenseless woman (myth, of course, characterizes Neoptolemus as a killer of the defenseless). Polyxena is not even a member of the community for which she dies, and her sacrifice is not undertaken to prevent a city's capture in war or some other extreme threat. Arguing with Hecuba, Odysseus contends, not that Achilles' wrath immediately threatens the community but that Achilles is entitled to the honor he seeks (309–10). Insofar as her gesture evokes death in battle, therefore, it marks difference rather than similarity, and an audience may infer that Polyxena herself chooses to mark that difference.

Exposing the breasts is, however, not unfamiliar in Greek literature, and its literary associations suggest a series of possible meanings. A mother supplicates her child by showing the breast as a reminder of the child's obligation to repay τροφή. The two great examples, of course, are Hecuba in the *Iliad* (22.79–89) and Clytemnestra in *Choephoroi* (896–98). Polyxena's address to her mother's breasts in her farewell to Hecuba earlier in the play may have made this motif more accessible to the audience (424).³¹ In this context, the point of the gesture lies in its very inappropriateness. Polyxena is not begging for her life, and Neoptolemus is not her son. The display allows the author to signify that Polyxena is being deprived of the correct female role in the world; she will have no children.

The gesture also recalls the anecdote, traceable back to the *Little Iliad* and a familiar story to Athenians, that Helen saved her life at the capture of Troy by showing her breasts to Menelaus. Dazzled by her beauty, he was unable to kill her.³² The reflection of Helen's gesture is more intense than that of Hecuba's and Clytemnestra's display of the maternal breast because the situations are closer to being parallel. Polyxena is a beautiful young woman, not a mother, while earlier passages in the *Hecuba* have evoked Helen. Hecuba had argued to Odysseus that since Helen was both outstandingly beautiful and to blame for the war, she, and not Polyxena, should be sacrificed (265–70), and had closed the scene after Polyxena's exit with a wish that she could see Helen suffer comparably (441–43). Polyxena is repeating the gesture that saved Helen, who is her opposite here, as Helen is Iphigenia's opposite in *Agamemnon*, as I have suggested above. Since the play itself does not refer explicitly to this incident, the audience cannot assume that Polyxena, as a character, knows about it, so it is not Polyxena herself who evokes Helen but the implied author.

³¹Bibliography and other examples in Garvie ad loc.

³²Fr. 17 Allen. The story was also told by Ibycus, and there is an allusion in Euripides at *Andr.* 627–31 and in Aristophanes at *Lys.* 155. For sexual appeals to avert death, Friedrich 3–28.

This parallel puts the Greeks more clearly than ever in the wrong, because it shows that they murder the innocent while sparing the guilty. Helen saved herself by displaying her value as an aesthetic and sexual object. Trying to convince Odysseus to sacrifice her instead of her daughter, Hecuba contends that she, as the mother of Paris, is actually responsible for the war (387–88); but, for all the Greeks' concern to provide Achilles with his due in return for his services to them, it is clear that women (at least captive women) are more important as aesthetic and erotic objects than as players within the system of repayment for services performed or injuries inflicted. That they are moral agents is not denied—Menelaus had intended to execute Helen, and Odysseus admits owing a debt to Hecuba—but such considerations are relatively unimportant where women are involved. Hecuba, being old, is not valuable enough to be offered to Achilles.

Clearly, Polyxena does not intend that the gesture of exposing her breasts should save her. She has already declared her willingness to die (346ff.) and argued that after the fall of Troy death is for her the best outcome, since her body has already lost its proper purpose, to be the wife of a king (351–56). Her speech looks to both the personal suffering of slavery and her own awareness of her earlier value in the marriage market, when she was “considered worthy of kings” (366). She imagines herself as a slave forced into a sexual relationship with a “bought slave” (365–66). One would actually expect her to be used as a concubine by one of the Greek leaders, and within this very tragedy Cassandra's status as Agamemnon's concubine is treated as generating obligations close to those of marriage. Polyxena, however, exaggerates her own potential devaluation. It is, indeed, peculiar that she is still a virgin after the sack. Not only is her virginity essential to the sacrifice, it also gives her a special value even in slavery; although she is no longer free, as a virgin she is still precious, and her death, even while abusing that preciousness, simultaneously confirms it. In warning Hecuba of the approaching sacrifice, even the women of the chorus come close to aestheticizing it:

...τύμβου προπετῇ
φοινισσομένην αίματι παρθένον
ἐκ χρυσοφόρου
δείρης νασμῶ μελαναυγῇ (150–53)

Falling onto the tomb, a virgin, crimson with blood in a darkly
glittering stream from her neck adorned with gold.

(To be sure, the Euripidean chorus typically gilds and prettifies all its subjects, and focuses on the jewelry the enslaved victim still wears).

There is a paradox in this reckoning, however. Polyxena sees her enslavement as depriving her of not only status but also value. In her own vision of the future, she will no longer be an object of desire for the men of her own class, as if even her erotic value has been lost. Although it is only this value that makes her worth offering to Achilles, the Greeks' willingness to put so precious a possession to no good use shows that they do not appreciate it properly. But by displaying herself, assimilating herself to a beautiful object, she fully re-establishes her worth. In the first place, she again becomes an object of beauty and desire. Through the complex nature of the display, however, she makes herself more than an object whose value is appreciated. In her first speech, she insists on her freedom and orders that she not be touched (548–49). Her self-exposure is connected with her noble willingness to die. By linking her own physical self-display to her display of aristocratic courage, she produces a very curious effect, for her virtue is an explicit refusal of slavishness: she offers herself *ὥς ἐλευθέρα θάνω* (550), in order not to be called a slave among the dead (551). Then, inviting aestheticization by her gesture, she repudiates it in death by remaining *εὐσχήμων* as she falls (569). The word is itself aesthetic and emphasizes the degree to which Polyxena's death is a performance, but it is glossed by the explanation that her "decorum" lay in concealing what should be concealed from the eyes of men. The concealment makes the earlier exposure all the more shocking; it is a reminder that this is an aristocratic virgin. Unlike the body of a slave, which may be beautiful but is also generally available to be looked at, Polyxena's beautiful body is one which has been hidden, which should properly have been kept for a well-born husband.

Polyxena's double gesture first invites the voyeuristic gaze for rhetorical effect and then reminds the voyeurs that it is not right for them to see. She exposes herself after asking not to be touched. Her simultaneous exposure and concealment evoke the tension inherent in the use of virgins in ritual. By exposing herself to the crowd, while reminding it of the impropriety of such exposure, she paradoxically restores her status; the Greeks are so impressed by her courage and nobility (571–80) that immediately after her death they cover her pyre with gifts. She is thus treated seriously as an independent moral agent, as the other women are not. But her success depends on a delicate balance: her mother, even after hearing of her honor at the hands

of the Greek army, fears that her corpse will be improperly handled by the mob (604–8). However carefully the tension is manipulated, the virgin's exposure to male desire is dangerous, an invitation to rape.

In other extant Euripidean depictions of human sacrifice, neither narrative descriptions nor choral evocations of the virgin's death emphasize public spectacle or erotic display, nor does the victim appear as a valuable object.³³ To be sure, even Euripides' *Erechtheus* is not entirely without irony. Praxithea emphasizes her willingness to give one child to save not only the community but the rest of the family (34–37), though she will lose not one but all of her daughters, and her husband as well.³⁴ Iphigenia in *IA* is very much an object of vision in the last part of the play, but improper exposure does not seem to be at issue; the only erotic allusion connected to the sacrifice itself is a single reference to the beauty of her neck (1516).³⁵

Commodification and excessive display are not inevitable themes of human sacrifice in Greek tragedy, but they do appear together. Both Aeschylus' Iphigenia and Euripides' Polyxena are to some extent precious objects wasted, displayed in the wrong manner and then destroyed rather than used. In the accounts of their sacrifices, excessive exposure is associated with images of statues and paintings, objects that are appropriately open to view. This imagery exploits an actual social function of virgins in sacrificial contexts, which their beauty should adorn. That exposure and service as ornament is supposed to be a preparation for marriage. Beautiful objects, on the other hand, are to be preserved; if they are employed in the service of the gods, they are used as dedications and not destroyed. While it turns the sacrificial victim into an object, then, this imagery does not mitigate the wrong of the sacrifice, even if other factors do. The killer of the virgin victim wastes valuable goods. As a possible moral agent, the sacrificed virgin demands pity; as a beautiful thing, she invites resentment at the bad economics of those who destroy her.

³³On *Heraclidae*, see Wilkins 1990, 177–94 and 1993, xxvii–xxx. Remarkably, the young woman asks to die at the hands of women rather than men, and Demophon agrees (565–67). On *Phoenissae*, see Foley 133–35; she argues that in other plays the community performs the voluntary sacrifice, and she sees Menoeceus' isolation as aberrant. Mastronarde 391–93 points out that Menoeceus' isolation is conditioned by the necessities of the plot.

³⁴Stressed by Vellacott 175–78.

³⁵“Euripides presents her desire for masculine reputation as a craving to be seen”: Rabinowitz 48–49.

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