

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

IPHIGENIE*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Iphigenie** (in Racine's *Iphigenie*)**Conscientious**

Overview The underlying theme of the play is an event diversely scripted in Greek mythology. As Euripides has it, in his *Iphigenia* (408 B.C.), the Greek fleet is stalled at Aulis, on its way to Troy—to begin defending Helen's honor. There is no wind, to drive the ships' sails, and to create this wind the gods demand the sacrifice of the daughter of Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greek forces at Troy. The ancient Greek narrator, Pausanias (2d cent. A.D.) creates a solution—the one Racine uses—to the dilemma of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, whose nobility of spirit reveals her ready to give herself up for the Greek cause. That solution involves the substitution of a second sacrificial princess, in place of our beloved Iphigenie.

Character Iphigenie is above all the dutiful daughter, who is ready to obey her father's dictates, and to let herself be sacrificed (if need be) for the sake of the Greek military mission. (So great is her devotion that she can overlook the timidity and self-interest of her father himself.) By remaining open to the destiny presumably laid out for her, in self-sacrifice, Iphigenie must be prepared to make a sacrifice of her own, of the growingly passionate love of Achilles for her. Having proved her willingness to go all the way to death, for her country, Iphigenie is graciously saved, at the play's end, by the discovery of a surrogate sacrifice, Eriphile, who is led to the pyre, then at the last minute rescued by an appearance of Artemis from the skies.

Parallels Women of great virtue and strength come to mind, as prototypes of such a noble figure as Iphigenie. One thinks of a heterogeneous (real and fictional) group like: Joan of Arc, who was executed in 1431, having by that age, 19, performed miraculously on behalf of French honor and military prowess, and qualified herself for canonization in 1920; Simone Weil, whose self-imposed abstentions—from the pleasures of life—underpinned her globalizing sympathy for the sufferers of WW II; or like the Antigone either of Sophocles or Jean Anouilh, whose *Antigone* (1944) depicts a fearless Antigone-character, whose courage in the face of tyranny inspired many to take heart against the Nazi occupiers of France.

Illustrative moments

Upset When we first encounter Iphigenie she is herself just arriving at the camp in Aulis, unaware of the fate apparently lying ahead of her. Seeing her father Agamemnon, hurrying past in the hubbub of activity surrounding the fleet's hoped for departure, **she is overjoyed by love for dad, and admiration for his role and importance, as Greek commander in chief. She expresses her love for him, which he reciprocates**, adding that she 'deserves a happier father.' Iphigenie in not a position, yet, to understand the depth of her father's unhappiness. Without luck—and without understanding-- she urges dad to calm down and cool it, to rejoin her in their old relationship.

Noble Obligated to make Achilles realize, that she is not able to join him in marriage—a consummation they both desire—Iphigenie describes to him her joy that she will, by her sacrifice, further the Greek cause and aid him, Achilles, to help avenge the dishonoring of Helen. Iphigenie thinks outside and beyond the box, contenting herself with the immortal reward, of being associated with the great deeds (to come) of Achilles. Iphigenie joins other Racinian heroines—Esther, Andromaque—in her selfless belief in a noble cause. Iphigenie rejects Achilles' offers to put his army behind her, and to rescue her—thereby, as she says, rendering ignoble her noble willingness to take the path of destiny.

Honorable Achilles is not pleased with Iphigenie's ingenious defense of her insistence on self-sacrifice. For a moment he makes as though to force her to join him, a mistake which brings out

her highest eloquence. She accuses him of giving in to a moment of passion, in order to achieve a rapid solution to their problems—while in fact he is simply making their situation worse. She puts it to him: *'ma gloire vous serait moins chere que ma vie?'*, *'my reputation could be less precious than my life?'* For Iphigenie her 'gloire,' her eternal reputation, is the most important jewel in her crown.

Glory Our final sight of Iphigenie , in Scene III of the last act, offers her making her final farewell to her mother, Clytemnestra, as she leaves the stage to be sacrificed. Even at this point her thought is for others; for her mother, to remind her that she has a son, Iphigenie's brother, as permanent reminder of a faithful daughter. That is not Iphigenie's only provision for her mother's well being; a few lines earlier Iphigenie urged her mother to stay apart from the flames which will consume her, dear daughter, and, in memory, never to blame dad, Agamemnon, for the downfall of his daughter.

Discussion questions

Is the substitution of Eriphile for Iphigenie dramatically convincing? Has Iphigenie sufficiently convinced you of her total willingness to sacrifice herself?

Is Agamemnon up to the job of commanding the Greek fleet at Aulis? Has he any personality issues that might get in the way of performing such an executive role?

How well does Greek myth (as in the case of Iphigenie) fit in the 17th century theater? How about the present? Could Iphigenie make it as a tragic figure on the contemporary American stage?