

IPHIGENIA

Racine

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.

Story Racine, typically, plunges his greatest dramas into a complex turning point in Greek (or sometimes Old Testament) narrative. Iphigenie is one of the starkest of these mythological assaults, and most clearly shows the highly literate tolerance of the 17th century French theater goer.

The background of the story is unremittingly harsh. The Greek narrative maintained that when Agamemnon was ready to lead the Greek forces on to Troy, he found that the winds had subsided and that the fleet was unable to sail. (The audience of Racine would have brought all this backstory to the table.) The tale continued: Agamemnon had offended the goddess Artemis, and was told that he could only activate the winds by sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenie. While the ancient Greek playwright, Euripides, wrote two versions of this tale, one about the sacrifice of Iphigenia itself, the other about her abduction to Tauris, and continuing life as a priestess, Racine needed to remodel the story in order to make it feasible for his own audience.

Once again, in Racine, the Greek army and fleet are gathered at Aulis, and the winds refuse to cooperate. The order comes down from on high that Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter; he hesitates, can’t make up his mind between the terrible choices. Finally his top lieutenant, Odysseus, demands the sacrifice, arguing that the army will rebel if this action is not taken. It is at this point that the incompetent Agamemnon, admittedly faced with a terrible dilemma, writes a fatal letter to his wife, Clytemnestra. In the letter, Agamemnon asks his wife to send Iphigenia to Aulis, where she can get married to Achilles. (Achilles knows nothing of this ruse, a major blunder on the leader’s part, and rife with poor consequences.) When Agamemnon realizes the consequences of his action, he reconsiders, writing again to his wife, to ask her not to come. We are thoroughly aware of this leader’s bungling of human relationships, and understand why later, as the myth itself plays out, Clytemnestra will put a knife to her husband’s throat.

The second letter to Clytemnestra arrives too late, and Iphigenia is already in Aulis. She is so dutiful that when she realizes what is in store for her—sacrifice; no marriage to anyone—she accepts the conditions—seeing somehow the higher good of the mission of the fleet against Troy. Submissive to her fate, like Isaac the son of Abraham, in the Book of Genesis, she lets herself be led to sacrifice, only to be saved at the last by a messenger, who comes down with the announcement that she has been replaced by a deer, and has herself disappeared from the altar.

The tale satisfies all the participants, even Achilles, who did not know that a fiancée was being sent to him. The audience will want to know, though, what the final meaning of the play is? Is it that fidelity, like Iphigenia’s, finally solves major problems? Is it that even blundering idiots, like Agamemnon, can become vehicles toward progress? The only moral hero in the play is Iphigenia, who asks no questions, when faced with sacrifice. She, however, is a passive character, who contributes little to the narrative except her willingness to fulfill it.

Themes

Fate In the end it is the 'gods' who resolve the fate of the stilled winds at Aulis. What the Greeks meant, by the 'gods,' is in this case story and myth, or destiny, and in face of this force the clamorous conflicts of the Greek officials was of no weight.

Indecision. Agamemnon is a bumbler, inept at personal relations, and, later in Homer's *Iliad*, unable to compromise in the conflict which juxtaposes him and Achilles at the beginning of the epic. Racine, following Euripides, puts negatively the brutal consequences of not being able to make up your mind.

Characters

Iphigenia is a kind of filler character, who does what she is told. She obeys the order to join Achilles in Aulis, though no plans have been made for a regular engagement, and she puts herself totally at the disposal of fate, in what involves self-sacrifice and the sailing of the fleet.

Agamemnon is a figurehead naval commander, as he will continue to be in the *Iliad* itself, where he proves incapable of defusing the violent quarrels between himself and Achilles. He is eager to set the fleet moving from Aulis, but in his efforts to solve the problem he stumbles on ill conceived plots, and in the end is only saved by 'intervention from on high.'

MAJOR CHARACTERS

IPHIGENIA (Conscientious)

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 is 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?

AGAMEMNON (Closed)

Character Agamemnon's character is closed, defeatist, and bumbling. Charged with leading the Greek forces against Troy, he is brought to a halt at the Greek port of Aulis, by a god-sent command that he must first sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenie, before the deadly calm breaks, and there is again wind. Given his closed character, Agamemnon is unable to share this terrible dilemma with his wife (Clytemnestra) and his daughter (Iphigenie), but rather decides to trick them into coming to Aulis, by declaring to them that Achilles wants to marry Iphigenie, in Aulis, before he takes off for Troy. The fall out from this deception is disastrous, for Agamemnon knows nothing of Achilles' planning, and furthermore will soon decide to prevent the arrival of the family from home. The fateful comedy of errors, created by Agamemnon, quickly turns the drama upside down. Et voila! We are still in Act I. Can you see why we call this Agamemnon bumbling? Closed is the word too, if by that we mean 'unable to communicate.'

Parallels Homer's own Agamemnon, the prototype of Racine's, shares with Racine's hero an inability to communicate, as we might put it today. Faced with a major kerfuffle, the fury of pride-wounded Achilles, at the opening of the *Iliad*, Homer's 'hero' has no creative sense of how to deal with other people; he is closed. Euripides, the master of psychology among the Greek tragedians, creates many 'heroes'—Jason (in *Medea*) and Pentheus (in the *Bacchae*) are good examples—who are ultimately weaker than the women (Medea and Agave and the bacchantes)--who overshadow them. Shakespeare's Macbeth is personally ambitious, but in the end it is only his wife, Lady Macbeth, who 'wears the pants in the family,' and who presses plans forward into (tragic) reality.

Illustrative moments

Dependent When first we meet Agamemnon, he is wading to another day of becalmed waters at Aulis, and laments to his servant, Arcas, that the life of kings is hard: he speaks of those who are happily free of the yoke that he, Agamemnon, bears, and who live in the obscurity where 'the gods have hidden them.' He closes in on his own problem-set, solely dependent as he is, he feels, on the fate the gods send. Agamemnon's mood eventually swings from side to side, but he is unable to explain the Iphigenie problem to others, with the result that no one can give him advice or consolation.

Remorseful At the point where we find Agamemnon he believes that he has successfully convinced his wife and daughter *not* to come to Aulis, and yet he has to believe he alone will be responsible, if the fleet is not able to sail. Already he begins to look back on his decisions and view them with remorse, seeing there was no way out of problems—except of course to discuss his dilemma with all the parties involved, and come to some sort of collective decision. Though the developing events have not yet played out to a conclusion, Agamemnon can already in Act One bemoan the situation he has put himself in, with no cards left to play.

Pathetic With rare candor, for a character in classical drama, Agamemnon exposes to us the dimension of shame which he feels growing around him—and the confession of which makes him an exceptional figure. Telling Arcas to go to Iphigenie, and dissuade her from coming to Aulis, he underlines a significant point: that his messenger should not let Iphigenie or Clytemnestra know to what danger he has exposed them, in even considering an earlier plan to deceive them into coming to Aulis. Agamemnon then adds the specific demand, that Arcas should make clear that ‘Achille a changé de pensée,’ ‘Achilles has changed his mind,’ and plans to postpone his marriage to Iphigenie until after the war. As happens in life, Agamemnon’s false story grows more involved as it develops.

Horried In the last scene of the first Act, Agamemnon learns that, in spite of his efforts to deceive his wife and daughter, he has failed. The mission on which he had sent Arcas—see above—has not arrived in time, and mother and daughter have not received the warning not to come. They have in fact just arrived at Agamemnon’s camp, in Aulis, where he must face the consequences of his multiple deceptions—for he has not only tried to trick his family but also Achilles, who is panting for his marriage to Iphigenie. Confusion, and Agamemnon’s humiliation, could not be more overwhelming.

Discussion questions

Why do you suppose Racine devoted almost the entire first act of this play to the confusions and prevarications of Agamemnon?

In modernist literatures—Proust, Dostoyevsky—we are used to ‘introspective characters,’ who reveal their inner thoughts to us. Classical literatures are typically more ‘objectifying.’ How does Agamemnon, caught in his binds, reveal his inner thoughts and worries?

Why does Agamemnon have so much trouble telling the truth to his loved ones and to Achilles? What is the source of this weakness, in the commander in chief?