

Iphigenia in Tauris. 414-412 B.C.E.

Euripides

Overview

Euripides composes this play directly into the atmosphere of the Peloponnesian war which was raging on all sides of Athens, and which had recently resulted in the defeat of the large Athenian naval expedition to Sicily. War news, the buzz of distant conflicts and 'barbarian' contacts, was widespread in Greece. So, as always in the traditional Athenian mind, was the thinking out of contemporary crises in terms of myth so deeply embodied that it became almost a language for the Greek on the street. The intervention of figures like Athena, Artemis or Apollo, as frequently in Euripides, is to be taken as literally, and needfully, as is the guidance provided to Hindu or Abrahamic worshippers at our moment, for whom recourse to a 'higher being' is directive in life's challenges.

Iphigenia in Tauris displays Euripides' lasting involvement with the conflict between the 'barbaric' and the civilized, which is centered in Athens. In plays like *Hecuba*, *Medea*, and *Helen*, Euripides is fascinated with the symbolic meaning of world regions like Thrace, the Caucasus, or Egypt, and in the present play Iphigenia becomes the pure sacrificial victim, herself now the sacrifice, who survives the region of death, to return to Athens with the sacred statue of Athena—the statue Orestes had been sent to recover, in the first place.

Characters

Iphigenia	daughter of Agamemnon, priestess of Artemis, in the land of the Taurians.
Orestes	brother of Iphigenia
Pylades	Orestes' cousin and best friend
Thoas	king of the Taurians
Herdsman	
Messenger	
One of Thoas' guards	
Chorus of fifteen Greek women, slaves of Thoas	
Athena	

Synopsis

Iphigenia, before the temple of Artemis, in the Taurian land, has been dreaming a nightmare concerning the death of her brother Orestes. Meanwhile Orestes and his friend Pylades have just arrived on shore, near the temple of which Iphigenia is now priestess. The two guys make plans to capture the Athena image. As Iphigenia resumes her priestly duties, Orestes and Pylades make their ways back to the shore, where they are arrested and captured by the temple guards. When the two Greeks are brought in, there follows a tense self-reveal conversation between the priestess and the 'intruders': Orestes and Iphigenia rediscover one another, as brother and sister, and great for rejoicing follows. Plans are laid for escape, and with the help of Athena, who enters to explain the big picture to Thoas, the Hellenes make their ways back to Myceneae, in Argos, and to some kind of resolution, in this often called 'escape play' of Euripides.

Story

Priestess. The story opens onto Iphigenia carrying out her priestly duties at the Temple of Athena, in the land of the Taurians, to which she has been sent after a miraculous escape from sacrifice at Aulis. Iphigenia has suffered a terrible dream-- that her brother Orestes is dead-- little imagining that Orestes,

and his buddy Pylades, have just arrived in Taurus, have survived shipwreck, and are pursuing their mandate (from Athena) to recover the goddess' cult statue, which is kept in the Taurian temple.

Reunion The shipwrecked Greeks are brought before Iphigenia, whose job is to sacrifice all Greeks who land on the coast of this distant barbarian region; instead of sacrifice, though, one conversational matter leads to another, and in the end Iphigenia and Orestes discover one another, brother and sister, and are transformed with joy. The two guys, however, are already marked out for sacrifice, and begin at once, in connivance with Iphigenia, to plan the difficult escape, with Iphigenia and the much sought statue of Athena.

Thoas. Since her escape from sacrifice at Aulis, and her loss of a marriage to Achilles, Iphigenia—who escaped to Taurus when her body was replaced by a fawn—has been a prisoner of the Taurian king, Thoas. She has been granted a new life, though back home no one knows that she has survived, and is beholden to Thoas, but when he discovers the subterfuge by which the Greek intruders—and the fleet of fifty sailors that brought them there—have escaped, he is angry. When Iphigenia makes her own escape good he sees that he has been totally deceived.

Reportage. The escape of the Greeks, sailors and ship as well as Iphigenia, is recounted lengthily, by the messenger who enters to explain the drama of the escaping ship on the high seas. This hundred plus lines of narration is especially dramatic, and makes itself part of the story.

Resolution. Thoas is bitterly deceived, yet Athena stops him: 'call off your streaming soldiery, stop your pursuit.' Destiny, the goddess explains, had precise plans for the brother and sister created by Agamemnon: Orestes, doomed still to be driven by the Furies, was to establish a temple to Artemis of the Taurians, while Iphigenia was to perform annual sacrifice at that temple.

Themes

Barbarism. Euripides, though critical enough of Greek ways, nonetheless makes much use, in many of his plays, of the polarity between Hellenism and barbarism. In the present play, the distant Caucasus—that is, today's Crimean peninsula, mysteriously distant to the Greeks—is appropriate for the kind of uncivilized sacrificing, especially of Greeks, that makes up the activity of the temple outside King Thoas' palace. Thoas himself is the perfect barbarian to be in charge of the government of Tauria.

Family. As we see from the connections between Orestes, Cassandra, and Iphigenia, the bonds among myth-family members, like the bonds among Hellenes on the ground, living their time, are close and intricate. Iphigenia's isolation, in Tauria, is most painful to her because she is cut off from family members back in Greece, and cannot even convey to them that she is alive.

Religion. Euripides is widely considered a sceptic in religious matters, and certainly he thinks on the border of the upcoming Socratic questionings which will increasingly mark the thought of the prominent Sophists of his moment, like Prodicus and Protagoras. At the same time, however, Euripides' plays are full of scenarios in which dialogue with gods like Athena, Apollo, and Artemis is intense, heartfelt, and, as in the present play consequential for the dramatic action.

Worship. Nothing better exemplifies the faith of the Euripidean Greek, in the efficacy of worship, than the importance for Orestes of recovering the Athena statue from the Taurian temple—where as it happens Iphigenia is priestess. The sacred statue itself is holy, though it has been mistreated.

Escape. The present play is often viewed as a play of escape. The gods arrange the conclusion of the play, from the time the Greek sailors flee Taurus, to the return of Orestes and Iphigenia to Argos. The rough ocean is the only obstacle that presents a challenge to this escape. And even it is under the benign control of Poseidon. The gods have determined that there will be a resolution to the exhausting life wanderings of Electra.

Character Analysis

Iphigenia Iphigenia is the main character. She it is whose destiny, after having been transported to the distant land of the Taurians, draws others to her, and makes her ultimately the one who can put an end to her wanderings, accepting Athena's mandate, that she should become the priestess of the goddess in the rolling hills of Brauron, in Attica. Iphigenia's character makes evident why the gods should so deeply entrust her with the instructions of fate. She is, after all, nobly patient, having been deceived in her expectations of marriage, having been consigned, but patiently, to the far corners of the world, and having remained true to Orestes throughout all her movements.

Nightmarish. As we first meet Iphigenia she is recovering from a dreadful nightmare of the death of her brother, Orestes. Clearly this was a premonitory dream, for the brother arrives soon after the dream.

Questioning. As Iphigenia grows calmer, in discussion with the still unidentified Greek, Orestes, she grows more probing, giving evidence of her clear memory and sharp mind.

Emotional. Once Iphigenia has recognized and embraced her brother, she rushes into the urgent problem of moving herself and the two men back to Greece. She is an electric wire of plans and strategies.

Modest. In assessing the chances of a safe return home, Iphigenia prioritizes the importance of her brother's safety, minimizing the importance of women's role: 'a woman does not count for much.'

Deceptive. Faced with Thoas' anger and confusion, about the identity and escape plans of the Greeks, Iphigenia rapidly concocts a story about the need to purify the men prior to sacrificing them. She is buying them time to get down to the return ship.

Parallels. Goethe's *Iphigenie in Tauris* (1779) is a brilliant play around Euripides' Taurus play. The core of the drama is the relation between Iphigenia and Thoas, who has fallen for her. Iphigenia is amazed when her brother arrives, and at first can think only of escape plans. When she realizes how deeply committed she has become, to the King who gave her shelter, she realizes that she is conflicted about how to move in her situation. That brilliant and touching inner conflict has in it the makings of a drama, modern, sentimental, and powerful, different in each regard from Euripides' conception.

Discussion questions

Euripides makes extensive use, as you see, of a number of myth themes: the Trojan War return and the fate of various victims; the ominous and difficult voyage to Troy; the fates of certain post war families, like that of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Why do you suppose Euripides is drawn to these traditional and well known themes? In plays like the *Bacchae*, *Alcestis*, *Medea*, and the tales of Herakles, he takes other paths. Why? What is Euripides' relation to his own literary history?

Is Thoas intended as a representative of 'barbarism' in the present play? Does Iphigenia scorn the king, or feel sympathy for him? Is there any hint, in Euripides, of the kind of 'sympathy for the barbarian' that Goethe (above) sees?

Do you see a continuity between the *Iphigenia in Tauris* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*? Has Euripides convincing insights into 'female psychology'? Are those insights similar across various women characters—Helen, Hecuba, Medea, Alcestis?