

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EURIPIDES' *IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS*

BY

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I BACKGROUNDS:

A. THE MYTHIC BACKGROUND:

“Here, as in the *Helen*, I suggest it is likely that Euripides’ myth consisted of a new combination of pre-existing mythical elements. According to one source, the counterfactual Iphigenia-myth of the substitution at Aulis *and* the transportation to the Black Sea existed as early as the seventh or sixth century BC in the *Cypria*. Herodotus discusses Iphigenia as a deity in his section on the Taurians’ custom of human sacrifice. I believe that Euripides’ innovation lay in the fusion of precise details. Previously Iphigenia either died at Aulis or was immortalized; in this play, she survives *as a human*, and eventually returns to Greece. Ultimately, we cannot know the extent of Euripides’ originality, invention or allusion. It is not impossible that Euripides’ counter-factual Helen- and Iphigenia-myths were completely invented in every particular.” M. Wright

B. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (play produced ca. 414 BCE):

“The second part of the Peloponnesian War saw the most spectacular of the Athenian campaigns, the one that most reversed Perikles’ cautious strategy, and the one that made inevitable Athens’ final defeat. In 415 B.C. she sent an enormous expedition to capture Sicily, supported it with large enforcements and lost the whole force. Thucydides devotes nearly a quarter of his whole history of this war to this one campaign; for he clearly saw it as the supreme example of the arrogant self-confidence which he considered to be the cause of Athens’ ultimate defeat. In the final battle in the Great Harbor of Syracuse in 413 B.C. the Athenian fleet was totally destroyed, and after a few weeks of wretched indecision and attempts to escape overland, most of the expeditionary force was killed. The few who were captured mostly died of mistreatment in the quarries of Syracuse. The blow to Athens was enormous.”
Amos & Lang

C. THE DRAMATIC BACKGROUND:

“Besides the great tragedies ‘of the most tragic poet’ (Aristotle) Euripides had another side to his genius: he introduced to the theater of Dionysus new forms of drama, plays like the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Helen* and *Ion* which critics have labored in vain to define. They are clearly a radical departure from Euripidean tragedy and have been called romantic tragedy, romantic melodrama, tragicomedy, romances and romantic comedy, to list only a few. One cannot help suspecting that what everyone would like to call them is comedy, provided the word is understood in its modern, not ancient terms. What characterizes these plays is, first and foremost, the undeniably comic element of scenes that provoke laughter.... Secondly, the action is set in a context that emphasizes domestic realities – food and drink, clothing, cooking and cleaning. Besides these two basic elements of comedy, broad humor and mundane detail, Euripides focuses his comic plots on the device of the hair’s-breadth escape, a standard feature of comedy. Moreover, the escape results from a recognition not the prelude to a tragic action but leading inevitably to a happy ending. Finally, in these comedies the traditional values which are reaffirmed are those of a social, racial or national group.”
Bernard Knox

II PLOT SUMMARY AND STRUCTURE:

The play falls naturally into **three distinct movements**: 1) scenes introducing the exotic setting and back story, the heroine and hero and their problems, and the central themes; 2) the long, delayed and complex recognition sequence; and 3) the escape plot resulting in safety, restoration and salvation.

“When the play opens, Iphigeneia, having just had a dream which she interprets to mean that Orestes is dead, mourns for her brother. Orestes, however, is still alive and has just arrived with his friend Pylades. After killing his mother in obedience to Apollo’s oracle, Orestes received another oracle to find release from his mother’s Erinyes by taking Artemis’ statue from the Taurian land to Athens. When Orestes has an attack of madness, he and Pylades are captured and brought for sacrifice to Iphigeneia.

The priestess learns that the young men are from Argos and agrees to help one of them escape if he will take a letter to her friends in that land. While she goes to get the letter, each of the young men offer s his life for the other. They finally agree that Orestes will die while Pylades will carry on the family name as the husband of Orestes’ sister Elektra. When the priestess returns to give Pylades the letter, she reveals that she is Iphigeneia. Orestes joyfully recognizes and embraces his sister, and, after he correctly answers questions about their family, Iphigenia also recognizes her brother and rejoices with him.

The siblings then plan their escape. Iphigeneia tells Thoas, king of the Taurians, that the young men are matricides, who must be purified in the sea along with Artemis’ statue, which their presence has polluted. Pretending to conduct secret purification rites, the three put out to sea in Orestes’ ship, taking the stature with them. They almost escape, but a wave pushes the ship back to shore, and Thoas pursues. All is not lost, however, for Athena appears *ex machina* to assure a happy ending. She calms the sea, tells Thoas to call off the pursuit, prophesies a safe return to Greece, and establishes rites in honor of Orestes at Halai and in honor of Iphigeneia at Brauron.” Elizabeth S. Belfiore

III THEMES:

A. “There are, however, two main themes which enrich the story and which are charged with real tragic feeling. The first is the **longing for Greece** so beautifully expressed by Iphigenia and the chorus; the second is the **meaning of human sacrifice**. Both themes are closely related, for the desire for Greece includes the desire for Greek, civilized, ways of worship. Nowhere are the gods made responsible for the barbaric form of worship. And the religious problem raised, the dramatist gives an unusually clear answer: in the words of Iphigenia, the ritual of human sacrifice only expresses the nature of the Taurians themselves.” G.M.A. Grube

B. This play takes on the role of **accident (tyche)** in human life much more seriously than any other Euripidean tragedy does. Whether this is or is not a chance-dominated world is one of the subjects upon which all its characters speculate and the theme is introduced in the opening lines of the first stasimon. Both Iphigenia and Orestes share the chorus’ vision of a *tyche*-governed universe though Athena corrects everyone’s misapprehensions in her speech *ex machina*. Athena restores what chance had taken away, and this Chance, strong enough to provoke the gods as well as men, has, in this play, a curious, semi-demonic power” A.P. Burnett

C. "But the cheerfulness of his play is serious, and in it I find two dominant ideals: the **love of Greece as a whole (Panhellenism)** and the idea of **friendship (*philia*)**, the devoted friendship of Iphigenia, Orestes and Pylades, the love of Greek for Greek so prominent in other Euripidean plays."
R. Lattimore

D. "Although he is important in his own right, Pylades' dramatic function is primarily *philos* of Orestes. The relationship between the two young men exemplifies the three kinds of ideal *philia*. In their roles as companions, brothers-in-law and, finally, blood kin, Pylades and Orestes provide a model of positive reciprocity that counteracts the negative reciprocities exemplified by previous generations of the house of Pelops and by Orestes and Iphigeneia themselves."
Elizabeth Belfiore

E. **Illusion/Reality**: "As in the *Helen*, the two halves of this plot depend on two successive delusions. In the prologue both Iphigenia and Orestes reveal their illusions, each the victim of a similar delusion: each (for different reasons) believes the other dead."
D.J. Conacher

F. "Nevertheless, it is misleading to say that the **gods** show their true natures by opposing human sacrifice. Just as the humans first engage in and then actively reject bloodshed, so the gods first accept and command and then actively reject and forbid murder. Euripides emphasizes this **change in gods** and humans in several ways.
Elizabeth Belfiore

G. "The *Iphigenia in Tauris* is a play of rescue deserved. Its central event is the permanent interruption of that human catastrophe, human sacrifice, and this interruption can be seen as a form of divine rescue for mortals. The gods, as usual, can be read in more than one way, but no one will deny that the raw subject of the play is **salvation (*soteiria*)**. The verbal surface of the play is heavy with *soteiria* words, and the poet has amused himself by wringing from his fiction no less than ten examples of the rescue of human beings."
A.P. Burnett

IV INTERPRETATIONS OF *IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS*:

A. "Few plays appear to illustrate better than the *IT* Kitto's description of Euripidean tragicomedy as entertainment divorced from tragic reality and serious themes. It begins with a miracle; it provides, in a neatly evolving plot, a plentitude of excitements, bloodstains, 'heroics,' close calls and thrilling escapes; and it seems, at least at first glance, more innocent than even *Ion* or *Helen* of serious undertones and potentially tragic situations."
D.J. Conacher

B. "In truth the *IT* is not one of the deeper tragedies, nor is it personal and intense. The dominant emotions are homesickness and family feeling. The Euripidean drive for escape is there, but this time it is not escape from love, sex, self, or life, but from disliked foreign climes to Greece. But behind the chorus of captive women expressing their feeling of homesickness one can see Greek women from stormed cities (like Melos) sold as slaves into barbarity. It is only here, then, through them, I think, that the time of war in which this drama was written makes itself felt."
R. Lattimore

C. "It is the parallelism of the fates of brother and sister, and in general the motif of human sacrifice, which holds the play together and gives it its meaning. What Orestes undergoes in the land of the Taurians is, in effect, a ritual re-enactment of his sister's fate at Aulis. We have, in this play, not merely an *aition* but a paradigm, in a sense, a representation of the first ritual celebration of the event. In addition, the motif of human sacrifice is of importance on the whole question of the relationship between mortals and gods."

David Sansone

D. "The play is centrally concerned with the avoidance of bloodshed. In the central *pathos*, Iphigeneia, who has already been sacrificed by her father, is about to sacrifice Orestes, in ignorance that he is her brother. Recognition prevents fratricide and allows the rescue and purification of Orestes. The averting of bloodshed in the central event of the plot is also reflected in many more minor incidents. Iphigeneia not only rescues her brother, she also forgives the father who tried to murder her, and she refuses to attack Thoas, the Taurian *xenos* who holds her captive."

Elizabeth Belfiore

E. "The *IT* is the most hopeful of the Euripidean so-called romances. Toward the end, on the simple level of action, it turns into a tense, confident melodrama; but though the structure and action necessitate the melodramatic close, more solemn tones are always present, constantly reverberating through the plot, and keeping it in tune with Euripides' lifelong concern the meaning of divinity as it enters the human sphere. The solemnity centers on the image of sanctity, or purification, oddly joined with some act of violence whether it be matricide under Delphic command or Iphigeneia circling the hair of her human victims with lustral water."

Cedric Whitman

F. "It is possible to read the *IT* as an extended aetiology for Artemis-worship, which explains certain 'darker' aspects of the fifth-century Attic cults at Halae and Brauron. The play's religious message is concerned with the integration of Greek and barbarian elements: when Orestes brings both Iphigeneia and Artemis from the wilds of the Taurian land to civilized Greece, it is symbolic of a fusion of cultures. This explanation might suggest a largely positive, affirmatory interpretation: Euripides is reminding us, it seems, that Greek culture, despite its oppositional, polar rhetoric of 'self' and 'other', does really contain a mixture of elements (racial, linguistic, religious, mythical) from different ethnic origins."

Matthew Wright

G. "It is commonly recognized that the *IT* is a play about sacrifice and salvation. Moreover, there seems unusual critical unanimity in stating that the lack of seriousness, the dramatic structure and tone of the play preclude true tragedy and tragic emotions. But a second level of meaning also obtains in the *IT*. For while the play is one of salvation, it is a salvation via means which should in 'real life' be condemned: matricide, theft, deceitful persuasion and outright lies. The *IT* comments ambiguously on Athens' role in the Greek world and the means utilized to obtain and maintain that position. Euripides asks here, yet again, upon what terms civilization, here equated with Athenian power, is possible."

Karelisa Hartigan.

