PERSONAL, PATERNAL, PATRIOTIC:
THE THREEFOLD SACRIFICE OF IPHIGENIA IN EURIPIDES’
IPHIGENIA IN AULIS

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Abstract
In the IA, Iphigenia accepts to be sacrificed. This voluntary sacrifice must be interpreted as a result of her threefold motivation: personal, love for life; paternal, love for her father Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army which is about to sail to Troy; and patriotic, love for her country, the great Hellas, whose dignity and freedom Agamemnon and the army intend to defend. These three motives are interconnected and should not be considered separately. This is the principal Euripidean innovation with regard to the mythical and Aeshylean tradition of Iphigenia’s sacrifice. It allows us to reconsider the Aristotelian criticism concerning Iphigenia’s change of mind, and to restore the unity of her character.

Keywords: Euripides, Iphigenia, sacrifice, father, patriotism

There is a literary and mostly Euripidean motif, self-sacrifice; a context, the imminent Trojan war; men and women aiming at the right thing to do according to their status in the right place and at the right time; a young man, Achilles, and a young girl, Iphigenia, who are supposed to be married; a chorus of strangers, women of Chalkis, visiting Aulis and assisting at the events. The last of the extant Euripidean plays provides reversal, emotion, “patriotic” speeches. But above all, it provokes pity and admiration, and raises many questions about the very value of life, death, sacrifice, about the willing or unwilling offer of one’s self to the cause of the many. If there is

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one play where all Euripidean themes are exposed in the clearest manner, this play is undoubtedly the *IA*.

The majority of the interpretations of Iphigenia’s sacrifice only focus on *one* main aspect concerning her motivation and *volte face*: the patriotic/Panhellenic, the personal one (desire to be praised, to control her own destiny, to surpass the ordinary female standards etc.) or the “paternal” one. Our aim in the present article is to re-examine Iphigenia’s sacrifice, in order to point out its threefold character and to study Euripides’ reflection within the framework of a global quest for new standards of nobility.

As a daughter and a young girl, it is quite natural for Iphigenia to be influenced by her parents’ opinion; but it appears less natural that a girl prefers the *paternal* to the maternal motivation and arguments. As a maiden and a princess, Iphigenia aspires to the preservation of her high social status, and to the praise offered by her household and relations; these aspirations could be fulfilled through her marriage to Achilles; yet, like the other Euripidean maidens, she realizes that this traditional solution would not guarantee any happiness or glory. Iphigenia *claims* a better life, and therefore rejects the traditional female destiny; she accepts dying because she cannot bear the thought of a mediocre life. This is the “personal” aspect of her sacrifice. The third aspect, the more obvious one, is the patriotic or Panhellenic. As a Greek, Iphigenia really wants the Greek army to sail to Troy and win the war; but, as a woman, her only contribution to this war is to repeat her father’s patriotic arguments, and to become a mouthpiece of his cause, which she completely embraces. Through her choice, she symbolically accompanies her father during his Trojan expedition. Her patriotic sacrifice is the only way to be a part of her father’s plan.

Our purpose is to examine whether or not Iphigenia, the last victim, reminds us of all the previous ones, embodying the traits of every other Euripidean victim in a unique character.

1. Iphigenia’s past

Before Iphigenia appears on stage, what do we know about her? Almost everything, in other words almost nothing. No one is supposed to ignore her legendary past, which is a part of the epic tradition (*Cypria*¹, *Cypria*¹, *Chrest.* 1, 135-43. López Ferez 2014: 164-175 provides a comprehensive survey of Iphigenia’s mythical past and its influence on Euripides, with an updated bibliography.)