

EURIPIDES UNDER THE  
“HAPPY ENDING” EMPIRE:  
*IPHIGENIA AMONG THE TAURIANS*  
AS A REAL TRAGEDY

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A far away and strange land, a story shrouded in mystery, and a great and perfect happy ending—all of these factors have been considered by the majority of scholars as proof of the following point: *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is not a real tragedy. This paper demonstrates the opposite. Few would deny that we are faced with an evasive melodrama. Almost a novel on stage, the play shows us how Euripides was simply trying to entertain his audience—forgetting the classic objective of Greek tragedy, overlooking the desire to show a universal truth through the symbol within the myth. An in-depth study of the resources used by Euripides, however, as well as a new reading, free from pre-conceived ideas, reveals tragic elements inside the story, a spectacle full of *phóbos*, *éleos* and *kátharsis* and a deep, painful, woeful message, screaming against the Peloponnesian War. Thus, we aim to revise Euripidean theatre, which is more human and less scientific, more closely related to its historical context, and somewhat less bound to modern preconceptions and analyses.

## Introduction

*Iphigenia among the Taurians*: a tragedy?

I begin by declaring my intentions for this paper as clearly as possible. This paper focuses mainly on new questions, on opening new doors, and exploring doubts, rather than on striving to offer a clear and comprehensive answer. This is quite an open investigation: my aim is not to find the absolute truth. Euripides and his works are, without a doubt, a very popular topic, which many scholars have studied and debated. He is, together with Aeschylus and Sophocles, one of the most important tragic authors of the Ancient World, and the one from whom the most complete works have been preserved. Of his works, *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is not the most studied, nor the most celebrated piece. What are the reasons for this? Perhaps the most important reason is that it has never been considered as the author's most representative work. However, over

time, scholars have found merit in its attractive plot, the beautiful lyricism so characteristic of the last period of the Euripidean poetry, the realization of an almost perfect *anagnórisis* scene, and a brilliant *peripátheia*. In addition, especially and above all, the play's happy conclusion, its "happy ending", so perfect and so clean, leaves every audience or reader feeling elated. The "problem" arises when we discover this specific point: more often than not, most people define this play for what it is not, rather than for what it really is. *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is not a tragedy; it cannot be considered as a real, complete or genuine tragedy. Maybe the best summary for such a widespread theory is Platnauer's. He explains, in his magnificent 1938 edition, that "To begin with, Iphigenia is not a tragedy at all: there is no violence, nobody is killed and the play ends happily for everyone".<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that there are many solid arguments that back this theory. These arguments are based on Kitto's essay, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*, which classified Euripidean works into three groups.<sup>2</sup> This system differentiated the "proper tragedies" (*Medea*, *Herakles*) from the ones that he called the "New Theatre" or "New Tragedy" of Euripides. In this comprehensive second group, Kitto includes every Euripidean piece that does not fall into the traditional format of a tragedy. Within the group of "New Tragedies", he further distinguishes between Melodramas and Tragicomedies. None of these "new pieces" could be considered (sic. Kitto) real tragedies: but the tragicomedies have happy conclusions, so they become twice removed from the true characteristics of the tragic form. Kitto thinks, as do most scholars who accept his theories, that Euripides did not intend, when writing these pieces, to create real tragedies, but rather to create a different kind of theatre. He was restricted by the demands of the competition, but his purpose was no other than to tell a good story of adventure and love and light, free from the great, deep, and difficult message that every tragedy normally conveys. Linking this perspective to the historical context in which the plays were written, "Tragicomedies" (in Kitto's words) were likely intended to distract the audience: their purpose was to keep the audience away from the worries and sorrows of the war<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> PLATNAUER (1938: v).

<sup>2</sup> KITTO (1939: 311).

<sup>3</sup> A good approach to this perspective is GARCÍA GUAL's study (2006: 216–217).

## Another possibility, another reading, another show

However, some philologists have questioned this interpretation. Martin Cropp explained in his *I.T.*'s edition and commentary that those labels “risk distorting and simplifying our perception of the play”<sup>4</sup>. Several aspects remain unclear, and this robust interpretation raises several problems. It may be appropriate, therefore, to reconsider Platnauer's definition. For example, Platnauer considers the work to be a play with no violence. But can we be certain of that? One of the plot's foundations is the dark, cruel subject of human sacrifice—something that Greeks themselves considered dreadful and brutal<sup>5</sup>. The conclusion that a happy conclusion disqualifies the work as a tragedy also seems rather overhasty. Indeed, Euripides is not the only author to write pure and real tragedies without a wretched ending. Nobody doubts Aeschylus' *Eumenides* is a tragedy, in spite of “everything ending happily for everyone” (using Platnauer's own words). We should also remember that nobody in the Ancient World doubted that this piece was a complete, real tragedy<sup>6</sup>. So, ultimately, and because there seem to be reasons to be doubtful, the purpose of this paper is to call for a new reading of *I.T.*, as free as possible from preconceived ideas, opinions or theories. Reviewing the play again, allowing ourselves the liberty to be surprised by every single element that characterises it, taking it as the entity that is and was to begin with: a theatrical play, a spectacle, a show. So, let the show begin.

## Story and structure: Relevance of truth, change, and movement

*Iphigenia among the Taurians* tells the story of how Iphigenia survived her own sacrifice—the well-known Aulide's episode. Artemis took her and at the last moment replaced her with a deer, then carried her “going over the clouds”<sup>7</sup> to the strange and far away land of the Taurians. There

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<sup>4</sup> CROPP (2000: 42). Other scholars, as MURRAY (1946) have also tried to not see *I.T.* just as a tragicomedy.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., WILKINS, *State and the Individual – The Human Sacrifice* “The Greeks expressed strong views on human sacrifice in general: the practice was alien to them and, they thought, to their gods.” POWELL (1990: 178).

<sup>6</sup> HALL (2013: 47).

<sup>7</sup> Hyginus, *Fabulae* CXXI, 15 (Marshall): *Quam cum in Aulidem adduxisset et parens eam immolare vellet, Diana virginem miserata est et caliginem eis obiecit cervamque pro ea supposuit Iphigeniamque per nubes in terram Tauricam detulit ibique templi sui sacerdotem fecit.*

the goddess made her into a priestess, the one who kills every stranger that arrives in this land as an offering to herself. On the other hand, we see Orestes, the last link to the cruel, horrendous circle of blood that defines his family (Atridae). He arrives in the land of the Taurians with his friend Pilades, completely mad, sick and tired of living under the torment of his own demons (Furies). Here they will meet without knowing they are actually brother and sister. After a long and beautiful reunion, they look for the way to escape from the danger and brutality. Now, let us look carefully and find the special, the different point in this story. We have a deep and emotional human problem—a trauma. A terrible kind of tragic irony appears when we look at the next point. Both brother and sister have some terrible experiences in common: each is alive while (and in general “the others”) thinking the other is dead. Even when she has survived, everyone thinks Iphigenia has died. Everybody—not only her family, but also the audience. Before coming into the theatre, they assume the general belief based on the myth that Iphigenia died at the hands of her father Agamemnon. Orestes has reached a point of no return—he would rather be dead. His own relatives, his own people saw him disappear falling in his own disgrace, and they all considered him dead. Naturally Iphigenia thinks her brother is dead (so she says in the firsts verses of the play), and Orestes thinks his sister is no more.

Therefore, we can see that Euripides is able to present to his audience a curious, special problem in the play: life and death of brother and sister actually becomes a farce, confused, almost a mimesis<sup>8</sup>. In it a special chain of events is developing. Iphigenia is alive, and she is alive because she kills. She has become a murderer, and only paying that price could she survive and escape from a totally certain death. She survived her sacrifice, but only because she is now the one who carries out the sacrifices. On the other hand, Orestes committed a crime against his own blood; he is not an ordinary man anymore: he is now a murderer. In addition, because of this rotten atmosphere, he is damned by dreadful torments that make him feel worse than if he was dead, even to desire death. The audience observes how both characters are desolate and isolated human beings, who find themselves in desperate situations: both have lost perspective, moreover, they do not relish the fact of being alive. Recognition is the end of this situation, the end of revulsion. The end of despair appears with the change: change from stillness to movement.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. GARZYA (1962: 78).

## Different situations for different tragedies

Although brother and sister have this in common, there is an important difference between Iphigenia and Orestes’s despair. Iphigenia suffers from a situation that we can consider as “passive”. This does not mean that she does not do anything; she is not a static character. Nevertheless, she is in a sort of static situation. The reason for her despair and her torture has already past, and she has not taken an active role in the horror that has come over her. Cruel destiny took her as a simple victim. Conversely, Orestes’s situation is relatively more “active”. He created the very reason for his suffering: he is the one who took the weapon that labelled him as a murderer and damned him forever. If we now compare the way the siblings “work” in the first part of Euripides’ text, we will see that Iphigenia observes “from the outside” how Orestes keeps on fighting, offering the last drops of sweat together with Pilades, just to survive a terrible fate from which he cannot escape. From her unusual, strange position, the one of the priestess who lives because of the whim of a goddess, even when a mortal’s destiny is to die, Iphigenia sees how this stranger (she still does not know he is her brother) ends by going deeper and deeper into his horror. We have a character that acts and another character that looks on: we have a hero, we have a protagonist, and we have an audience too. If we remember now what was said earlier, *I.T.* seems to be based on the ambiguity between what is real and what is not real, the things that you believe are real and the things that just are real. If we remember this, then maybe it will not seem so crazy to think that here we have a duplication of the theatrical resources. We have more than one level of spectacle, more than one show in the same play. Iphigenia is the audience, but the Athenian citizens are an audience too; Orestes is the tragic hero that suffers the fate we expect from similar characters in true tragedies. The audience in the stands, Athenian people watching the play for the very first (and last) time, are experiencing tragedy in more than one level.

Therefore, it is helpful to think of two planes (or levels) of spectacle existing within one play. Two little tragedies are happening at the same time: at one level we face a spectacular setting, maybe the “real one”, in which the real audience observes the suffering of Iphigenia faced with a strange and peculiar story, while on another level we face an “under-spectacular” setting. In this second level, Iphigenia plays the role of the audience, witnessing the end of Orestes’ adventures. Orestes would be at the same time a sort of tragic hero, fighting a terrible and inexorable fate.

<b>Show levels on <i>Iphigenia among the Taurians</i></b>				
<b>Dramatic elements</b>	<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Protagonist</i>	<i>Spectator</i>	<i>Times and spaces</i>
<b>Spectacular level</b>	Unexpected confrontation between brother and sister (Iphigenia and Orestes) who do not know each other and are on a foreign land.	Iphigenia	Athenian citizen	SPECIFIC: Theatre (specific building for the representation) Religious ceremonies.
<b>“Under-spectacular” level</b>	The circle of blood of the Atridas. The murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes, madness cause by the Furies (catastrophe).	Orestes	Iphigenia	NOT CLEAR: Taurians’ land. Time after the Trojan War.

This theory can be confirmed if we observe Orestes’ behaviour, that conforms to all the essential characteristics of the tragic hero (we took Adrados definition<sup>9</sup>). Decision (together with Pilades, it is his own decision to advance towards danger); action (as attacking the animals in the beach during his moment of madness shows features that a character working as a messenger, the herdsman, explains to Iphigenia in the same way a typical *angelos* would do in a typical tragedy); loneliness (Furies only go against him, and when he faces the fact of being sacrificed, he knows he is the one who must die and assumes it); and suffering. Iphigenia’s reactions to him show her “audience” role too. In her journey we find (naturally, always in a subsidiary, secondary sense of talking and understanding) *phóbos* and *éleos* for Orestes, his tragic example, and even a kind of special *kátharsis*. Consider the following figure, which also provides examples from the text:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> RODRÍGUEZ ADRADOS (1962: 18).

<sup>10</sup> We follow DIGGLE’s edition *Euripidis Fabulae II* (1994) and CROPP’s edition (2000) for English translation.

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TRAGEDY INSIDE THE TRAGEDY

TRAGIC ASPECT	REPRESENTATION WITHIN THE “UNDERSPECTACULAR LEVEL”	TEXTS
PHÓBOS	Orestes – Hero’s voluntary marching to the catastrophe; Iphigenia – feeling fear by feeling the horror that is coming	<p>Verses 117 – 124            ... <b>χωρεῖν χρεῶν</b>            ὅποι χθονὸς κρύψαντε λήσομεν δέμας.            (...) <b>τολμητέον</b>.            “We must go to some nearby place (...) We’ll nerve ourselves”.</p>
MESSENGER SPEECH	Herdsmen – speech about the madness (catastrophe) suffered by Orestes	<p>Verses 235 – 342            Ἀγαμέμνονός τε καὶ Κλυταίμηστρας τέκνον,            ἄκουε καινῶν ἐξ ἑμοῦ κηρυγμάτων            “Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, hear a strange report from me...”</p>
ÉLEOS	Iphigenia – feeling empathy and sadness for the hero’s disgrace	<p>Verses 465–482            φεῦ·            τίς ἄρα μήτηρ ἢ τεκοῦσ’ ὑμᾶς ποτε πατήρ τ’; (...)            πῶθεν ποθ’ ἦκετ’, ὦ ταλαίπωροι ξένοι;”            “Ah! Who was your mother, who gave you birth, and your father? (...) <i>Unhappy strangers!</i>...”</p>
LONELINESS OF THE “NAKED TRAGIC HERO”	Orestes – assumes his tragic condition and assumes his fate	<p>Verses 844 – 850            τὴν τύχην δ’ ἔαν χρεῶν.            ἡμᾶς δὲ μὴ θρήνηι σύ· τὰς γὰρ ἐνθάδε θυσίας ἐπιστάμεσθα καὶ γινώσκομεν            “No, one should let fortune have its way. Singe us no dirges. We know the practices and understand them”.</p>
KÁTHARSIS	Iphigenia – pleasure, tranquillity and learning Search for happiness because of this learning	<p>Verses 835 – 842            Ἴφ: θαυμάτων            πέρα καὶ λόγου πρόσω τάδ’ ἐπέβα.            Ὅρ: τὸ λοιπὸν εὐτυχοῖμεν ἀλλήλων μετὰ Ἴφ: ἀτοπὸν ἄδονάν ἔλαβον            “Iph: More than marvels, beyond account has all this turned out!            Or: From now on, may we be fortunate together.            Iph: I have found a miraculous joy!”</p>

## What was Euripides looking for?

“For the sake of something bigger”

Having considered this duplication of the tragic form within the play, it seems more difficult to conclude that *I.T.* is not a tragedy at all. However, we also need to clarify one point. It is difficult to believe that Euripides would create all these complex systems just to show off his dramaturgic skills. It is not likely that he would create more than one level in the spectacle, producing a double tragedy, a double show, without an ulterior motive. What can be achieved by making this kind of theatrical play? Clearly, a double show can have a double impact over the “outsider or real audience.” An audience that witnessed this intense kind of representation would feel doubly stunned and engaged. At this moment, it is helpful to remember how important tragedy was from a social or political point of view in Fifth-century Athens. The author was seeking to teach something to those who were not on the stage, using the elements on the stage as his tools or weapons. Fifth-century theatre was symbolic. But the theory that Euripides was not trying to teach anything with *I.T.* is widespread. Kitto himself argued that it is a mistake to think that *I.T.* depicts something greater than just a good plot, a good story, and to think the opposite could bring us to judge wrongly the genuine values of the piece: it is a mistake to think that we can find “something bigger”.<sup>11</sup> Once again, we feel the duty to challenge this widespread thesis. What would happen if this pure, genuine tragedy was written for the sake of something greater? Let us return to the play, let us search for a message among the Taurians, giving ourselves the chance to think that every resource used in the play was used for a reason. So let us go back.

The structure of the tragedy is a circle—a blood circle. Violence is the sign, the blemish that defines everyone. A horrible, macabre familiar story has inflicted brutal damage to the humans that we see on stage. Both of them, Iphigenia and Orestes, regard themselves more as murderers than as humans or mortals. Both of them are alive but would rather be dead, both of them have shed blood and feel the pain for this crime. They have lost their way. Iphigenia claims that she is the leader of a “festival beautiful only in name” (v. 35), and Orestes identifies himself as the one who “lives in tribulation, nowhere and everywhere” (v. 568). Because of this violence, they have forgotten who they are: they are brother and sister, and

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<sup>11</sup> KITTO (1939: 313).



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they do not know it. Blood threatens to destroy their identities. Orestes does not remember who he is... even refuses to recognise his own name.

### Ιφιγένεια

σοὶ δ' ὄνομα ποῖον ἔθεθ' ὁ γεννήσας πατήρ;

Iph.: What sort of name did the father that sired you give you?

### Ὀρέστης

τὸ μὲν δίκαιον **Δυστοχῆς** καλοῖμεθ' ἄν.  
(vv. 499–500)

Or.: By rights I should be called Unfortunate.

This is the situation that we see when they face each other, after the moment of madness of Orestes, just when Iphigenia thinks her role of “bringer of death” is approaching. Moreover, this is precisely the moment when Pilades, the friend, arrives: he is the only one who is not in the circle, because his hands are not blood-stained. This is why he makes the recognition possible. Anagnorisis appears; brother and sister discover who they really are. Only after this process does salvation appear as a possibility, and the happy conclusion arrives. We shift from immobility to action, but Iphigenia and Orestes will not be the same again: they refuse to continue shedding blood in the future; they themselves break the blood circle and the chains of their terrible destiny, marked by revenge and hatred. To quote Orestes:

**οὐκ ἄν γενοίμην** σοῦ τε καὶ μητρὸς **φονεύς·**  
**ἄλις τὸ κείνης αἷμα·**  
(vv. 1007 – 8)

I will not become your killer as well as my mother's: her blood is enough.

Iphigenia:

**θέλω (...), οὐχὶ τῷ κτανόντι** με  
θυμουμένη, πατρῶον ὀρθῶσαι· **θέλω**  
(vv. 991 – 993)

I want to rise up again our ailing house (...): I feel no rancour for the man who wanted to kill me.

And even the Gods:

Ἀθ. καὶ **σὺ μὴ θυμοῦ**, Θόας.  
(v. 1474)

And you, Thoas,  
restrain your anger.

So what do we see, in *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, then? We hear a cry to stop hatred, a deep scream about the need of humans to not destroy each other, because humanity cannot destroy without bringing destruction upon itself. Violence is synonymous with the deepest and most hideous fate, only if we choose to understand that shedding blood is not an option, only if we do that, will we save ourselves and escape from doom. To take a step further, remembering that this play was performed in the year 414, in the middle of the stark Peloponnesian War, we can appreciate a poet who was advocating the end of violence, the end of “friends and enemies” system,

the end of blood circles and crimes, the end of war. In addition, we will find a real, pure, hard, anti-war tragedy.

## Conclusion

To be sure, the arguments in defence of the traditional interpretation of *Iphigenia among the Taurians* are many and solid. However, it seems that a new valid possibility emerges from our reading of the piece. Perhaps if we look beyond the preconceived ideas and search for a different way of viewing the play, we will not find just a good and happy-ending story: we might find “something bigger”. When discussing Euripides, one of the most studied authors of the Ancient World, it is exciting to think that we might discover something new in his lines, his verses, and his messages—that we might reach a deeper understanding of his pieces read countless times before us.

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