PSYCHOLOGY IN EURIPIDES' *Iphigenia at Aulis*

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My interest in the underlying psychology of the characters of the *I.A* stems from the amount of mind-changing that goes on in the play. Agamemnon, Menelaus, Iphigenia and Achilles all change their minds about the sacrifice. Certainly this makes for superficial dramatic interest, but we ought to look deeper than that.

First of all, how unusual is it for the characters of Greek tragedy to change their minds? Aeschylean heroes such as Eteocles, Pelasgus, Agamemnon and Orestes are confronted with situations (or moral dilemmas) which demand a decision. Aeschylus' Agamemnon, for example, briefly imagines the consequences both of sacrificing and of failing to sacrifice his daughter before he decides in favour of the deed. He then puts on the harness of necessity and thereafter never changes his mind.¹ Nor are Sophoclean heroes inclined to second thoughts. Ajax, for example, although he seems afraid that his resolve to take his own life will be undermined by the "feminine" arguments of Tecmessa, and although he recognises that mutability (even psychological and moral mutability) is an essential feature of the structure of the universe, still holds fast to his purpose.²

Now whatever it is that makes the Aeschylean or Sophoclean hero so consistent must surely be absent from the characters of the *I.A*. The element in question is, of course, a stable *ethos* or *physis* which manifests itself subjectively as a strong self-image and moral commitment. The essential difference between these Aeschylean and Sophoclean heroes and the main characters of the *I.A* is, I think, most clearly illustrated if we compare the Sophoclean with the Euripidean Electra. Both young ladies are hard, abrasive and generally unattractive in their hatred of their mother and their commitment to matricide. But the similarity is no more than skin deep. Sophocles' Electra certainly hates her mother and mourns her father, but, what is more important, she is morally committed to her revenge. It is this moral commitment that bestows upon her the saving grace of a measure of objectivity. She knows she is becoming a virago, and her tragic stature is primarily revealed in her commitment to a moral purpose which involves a terrible emotional and spiritual cost.³ This moral commitment explains why she never disowns the matricide,

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¹ Ag 218ff
² See especially the Deception Speech, Aq 646ff
³ See especially S 221ff
which she performs vicariously through Orestes. Euripides’ Electra does regret the matricide, but this by no means demonstrates her moral superiority to her Sophoclean counterpart. Rather the change of heart shows how blind she was to her own real interests. Euripides’ Electra in short has no moral stature. Her coherence and consistency up until the matricide are the coherence and consistency of an obsession, not of a moral purpose. Euripides’ Electra attains no detachment from her emotion of vindictive hatred until that emotion disappears of its own accord once its object has ceased to exist, and then Electra realises the extent of her self-deception.

The characters of the I.A., not surprisingly, resemble the Euripidean Electra more closely than the Sophoclean. I want to look at four characters: Agamemnon, Menelaus, Iphigenia and Achilles, all of whom change their minds. Is the reason for the change in each case perhaps the absence of moral integrity and a stable ethos? I shall examine Menelaus first because his case illustrates inconsistency and its psychological implications most vividly and instructively.

Like Euripides’ Electra, Menelaus is characterised chiefly by an obsession - his sexual infatuation with a promiscuous wife. At that point in the plot at which Agamemnon is temporarily resolved not to sacrifice his daughter, he points out to Menelaus, in an agon, the real (and highly discreditable) motivation behind the Trojan War: “Why are you angry? Who is doing you an injustice?” he asks. Menelaus obviously feels that in the first instance Paris had wronged him in seducing Helen, while now Agamemnon is doing him a further injustice in refusing to sacrifice his daughter to enable the fleet to sail to Troy. But Agamemnon points out to him that this attitude of blaming others is beside the point. (“You want a decent marriage? Well don’t expect me to provide it for you. The one you had you managed badly.”) But naturally the cuckold’s reaction is to blame the cuckolding male, rather than himself or the wife with whom he is still infatuated. According to Agamemnon - and there is no evidence that he is wrong - the guiding motive of Menelaus’ whole personality is the desire to hold a good-looking woman in his arms - and for that he is prepared to destroy an entire civilisation. The agon ends with the brothers unreconciled and with a somewhat equivocal and dubious moral victory to Agamemnon. But there is a surprise in store for us. About sixty verses later (during which Iphigenia arrives with her mother) Menelaus reenters professing a complete change of heart. Perhaps this is hypocrisy, since he has nothing to lose by merely pretending to change his mind now that the sacrifice is inevitable - the scheming demagogue Odysseus knows of the girl’s arrival - but if it is hypocrisy no one in the play labels it as such and no dramatic purpose would seem to be served by it. On the other hand, if we take it as genuine, Menelaus’ explanation of how he

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4 E El. 1183-84, 1224-26.
5 See especially 77.
6 381-82 (paraphrased).
7 382-84.
8 385 86.
9 473 ff.
came to change his mind provides us with a possible means of interpreting the other about-faces of the play. Menelaus saw his brother weep and wept in turn. Now emotional states are contagious, especially when objectified in behaviour. Communication by a sort of body language is in fact a hallmark of this play. At this point it is crucial. The physiological reaction in Agamemnon (namely tears) causes a similar reaction in his brother; this in turn brings about a change in feeling-tone from anger to pity and with this change arises a whole new set of arguments - this time against the sacrifice and against the whole infatuation with Helen. Intellectual and moral considerations enter the mind of Menelaus for the first time, but they are subordinate to emotions. For this reason they are unpredictable; we did not expect him to entertain them and we do not know how long he will continue to do so. Notice the similarity to the Euripidean Electra who changes her mind under the pressure of circumstances and the dissimilarity to the Sophoclean hero. Menelaus appears the passive recipient of any emotion that happens to engage his mind, whereas the feelings of the Sophoclean Ajax will have to contend for viability against that hero’s rigid ethos. In the characters of the I.A. I maintain, there is only a succession of emotional states ordered occasionally by an obsession or a delusion.

Euripides’ Agamemnon contrasts nicely with his Aeschylean predecessor. In the parodos of the Agamemnon we follow the precise course of the protagonist’s brief journey towards a decision. Brief consideration of the alternatives and their consequences is followed by a decision to sacrifice, and this decision is never regretted or revoked. Parakopa (infatuation) it may be, but it reflects also Agamemnon’s ethos as a man, a commander-in-chief, and an Atreid. Also the decision is presented as a purely mental process, by which, I mean that there is no reference to gestures, behaviour or to the external decor; and we note especially that Agamemnon makes the decision on his own. While he is influenced by what he knows to be the will of the allied commanders, he accepts their view and makes it his own, actively putting on the yoke of necessity.

Now Euripides’ Agamemnon is quite different. At the beginning of the play he is presented as the victim of a decision he has apparently already made and now regrets. We see him, through the eyes of his old slave, in an agony of indecision objectified in his gestures and behaviour and set in a clearly defined milieu. He is writing a letter, unwriting it, throwing it on the ground and seems on the point of insanity. Here is a man who cannot make up his

10 On Menelaus as a hypocrite see G M A. Grube, The Drama of Euripides (London 1941), 425 and P H Vellacott, Orestes and Other Plays (Harmondsworth 1972), 87-88. H. P. Foley, Ritual Irony (Ithaca 1985), 96, sees Menelaus’ volte-face more optimistically as a positive “willingness to empathise with and adopt another’s point of view and to give up desire”, but this empathy lacks moral and intellectual underpinning. Foley (ibid.) compliments Agamemnon for giving up ambition, but we should remember that he replaces it with paranoid fear and hypocrisy.

11 477 503

12 Ag 223

13 See Ag 214 17 That his fellow chiefs share his view is implied at 228 30 See also H. Vretska, “Agamemnon in Euripides’ Iphigenie in Aulis”, Wiener Studien 74 (1961), 22-23, 31.

14 Especially 28 42
mind—in this case whether to reverse his decision to sacrifice by dispatching a second letter to his wife countermanding the original instruction to send Iphigenia to Aulis. So he has made one decision and now he cannot decide whether or not to revoke it. We are not given his thoughts, only his ‘body language’—an impression of his inability to decide. However, we learn from his conversation with the slave that power is not as enviable as it once seemed, and we infer that ambition influenced his original decision.¹⁵

But even that original decision was muddied by indecisiveness. The Atreidae give mutually discrepant accounts of the events leading up to Agamemnon’s first decision (to sacrifice). Agamemnon himself claims that he did not wish to do it, but that Menelaus, using ‘every kind of argument’,¹⁶ talked him into it. Menelaus paints a different picture which shows his brother all too ready to sacrifice, and no attempt is made to refute this version.¹⁷ We are left with an impression of mutual buck-passing. The Atreidae both wanted the sacrifice, but neither was prepared to accept the responsibility of making a clear-cut decision. Perhaps that earlier Agamemnon knew his own mind, motivated as he was by ambition, but, like Electra, having got what he wanted, he no longer wants it. Love of his daughter has gained dominance in his mind, but he has meanwhile, by dispatching his first letter (that is by his initial so-called decision to sacrifice), created a necessity for himself. The second letter is intercepted by Menelaus, Iphigenia arrives at Aulis and the decision is now out of Agamemnon’s hands. His vacillation, combined with circumstances arising from a regretted decision, has created for him an ananke. He speaks of falling into the yoke of Necessity (an obvious contrast with the Aeschylean Agamemnon who puts his yoke on himself), and he blames a daimon (Artemis, bad luck?) for his predicament. But this is only more buck-passing.¹⁸ Now that his wife and daughter have arrived, he must face telling them the truth as it stands at the moment, namely that he has no wish to sacrifice his daughter, but the army, demagogically inspired by Odysseus, will force his hand. First of all, Agamemnon tries to conceal the situation, but then when concealment is no longer possible, he gives a twenty-one line speech that is a tour de force in point of ambivalence.¹⁹ On the face of it, in all but the last three verses he takes the line that the sacrifice is evil, the lust for the war demonic and insane, while in the final three verses he changes course, accepts the absurd notion that the war is a sort of noble panhellenic

¹⁵ D.J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (London 1967), 249 denies that Agamemnon ceases to be motivated by ambition, seeing him as playing with his emotions to deceive his conscience. See the discussion and rebuttal (with which I fully concur) in H. Siegel, “Agamemnon in Euripides’ I. A.”, *Hermes* 109 (1981) 258ff.

¹⁶ 97-98.


¹⁸ 442ff. See Conacher (n 15 above), 256; also Grube (n 10 above) 427 and Siegel (n 15 above). 264: “A mostly imaginary, almost paranoid belief rules Agamemnon, and it leads him to bring about what he fears most. In some nightmarish and ironic ‘self-fulfilling’ prophecy, Agamemnon, by believing and fearing that he is enslaved by Odysseus and the army, in fact becomes their slave.”

¹⁹ 1255-75.
crusade against the barbaroi with the purpose of putting a stop to the rape of Greek wives, and says that he himself and Iphigenia must do all they can to further this great cause! The inconsistency is ludicrous, but it would appear to stem from an agonised guilt that can bear honesty only so long and which must at the end swerve aside into hypocrisy and outright self-deception.20

What then is Agamemnon? A man who felt the generically human motive of ambition but became disillusioned with it and remembered how much he loved his daughter. And when he recalled that love, fear of Odysseus and the mob entered his mind and so he could not decide; and then finally, having decided in favour of his daughter’s life and against the war, he could not take the courageous action to counteract a situation which his own confusion and infirmity of purpose had caused in the first place. One can see then how hard it is to talk about Agamemnon’s nature, ethos, physis or what have you. Uncertainty, insecurity verging on paranoia and fear are his unifying characteristics, but these are all negatives that rush in to fill a moral vacuum.21 There is a vividness and sense of reality however in Euripides’ presentation of Agamemnon which is certainly post-Aeschylean - a general effect achieved in large part through the use of body language that creates a sense of concrete presence. We might then expect Euripides’ Agamemnon to be more sharply delineated than his Aeschylean predecessor. But, curiously enough, that is not so. While Aeschylus’ Agamemnon is not idiosyncratically individualised but is rather a type, he is nevertheless a clearly defined and relatively complex type. He is not so simplified as to stand for the Greek Everyman. Euripides’ figure, on the other hand, though brought before us with a livelier sense of his presence, is ultimately a less sharply defined character, precisely because of the wider range of his feelings and reactions. The effect might have been of the idiosyncratic had Euripides given him his own particular gestures or psychological make-up, but instead the realism conveys a striking sense of a more general physical human presence without sharper individualisation. For instance the gestures of Agamemnon as described by the old man in the anapaestic prologue are vividly human, but not idiosyncratic in the manner of, for example, the finger-joint cracking of Tolstoy’s Karenin.

Aristotle complained of the inconsistency of Iphigenia’s characterisation, as the young, naive maiden, traumatised by the thought of being killed, suddenly changes her mind and sees herself as nobly laying down her life for Greece.22 Now that we have examined the Atreidae and their changes of mind, we shall be less inclined to expect Iphigenia’s behaviour uniformly to manifest a consistent, easily identifiable physis. We may expect outward pressures to exert

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21 Siegel (n 15 above), 263, remarks: “Fear and powerlessness are the traits which seem to arise continually in Eunpides’ portrayal of Agamemnon.”

22 1368f.
a considerable influence on her and we shall look for a broader human psychological realism in her reactions.

Iphigenia, on the surface at any rate, conforms to a pattern familiar to Euripidean audiences: that of the young person (usually female) who offers up her life sometimes for the good of the group or community (Macaria in the Heraclidae, Menoeceus in the Phoenissae) or out of self-interest (Polyxena in the Hecuba). In each of these cases it seems we are intended to admire the self-sacrifice, though at least in the Phoenissae its value is undercut by the strong ironical suggestion that it serves no useful purpose. Still, Menoeceus' sincerity and purity of motive are left unimpugned.

In considering Iphigenia's case several questions arise, but let us start with the fundamental one of her freedom of action. Now she is certainly not absolutely free to choose whether or not to be sacrificed. If she has any freedom at all it must be limited to the choice of an attitude to adopt to the inevitable. But even this reduced freedom depends on correct understanding and will be further reduced without it. Iphigenia must understand why she is being sacrificed. Then her freedom will consist in her being able to adopt an appropriate attitude. Now the play's view of the war, for which the sacrifice is a prerequisite, is utterly negative: Helen was not raped but seduced, the revenge is out of all proportion to the offence and a whole civilisation will be cruelly exterminated. Iphigenia's sacrifice is simply evil. The proper attitude then would appear to be moral resistance, but when it is the victim who is morally resisting it is easy to suspect impurity of motive. However, Iphigenia does not resist. This leaves us with the possibility of a Stoical focussing by the victim on her own moral worth and especially courage, a demonstration of the possibility of happiness even in a predicament of intolerable evil. But this is not Iphigenia's position either. What she does is to deceive herself, making the intolerable less so by resorting to a tactic similar to that of her father. Agamemnon could confront the evil of the situation and his part in producing it only so long Iphigenia, while having nothing to blame herself for, nevertheless cannot live with the idea of a meaningless death, so she proceeds to give it the meaning her father eventually gave it against his better judgment. Unlike Polyxena, Iphigenia never really wants to die, but, like Polyxena, she wills the inevitable in order to appear at least to preserve the freedom of action consonant with eugeneia. It is hard to believe that she would have insisted on voluntary self-sacrifice had an acceptably safe avenue of escape opened to her. It is only after she becomes convinced of the impossibility of escape that the moral arguments occur to her, and these are maintained in the face of the visible evidence that the army is nothing better than an unruly mob. And as Iphigenia inclines more fanatically towards the sacrifice, the former attitude of rejection and the will to live show through the cracks in her heroic commitment. There is then an almost wilful self-deception in her view of the value of the sacrifice and even in her view of her own eugeneia.

23 1378 1401 CI 1269-75
Euripides does everything to point the contrast between her attitudes before and after the change, which suggests that he intends that change to reflect a view of character and psychology. Of course a change of mind - even if it is sudden or unexpected - does not necessarily imply either character transformation or inconsistency of characterisation. Iphigenia finds herself in a radically new situation. To a girl living in a comfortable, protected palace, freely chosen death must seem a remote and repulsive ideal, whatever the circumstances. But the alternative to an honourable death is no longer a dishonourable life but a dishonourable death. The radically transformed situation stimulates perhaps a more serious philosophical or existential attitude: how must she live and conduct herself in the final moments of her life?

Now it would have been depressing but plausible had Iphigenia died screaming, but it is impossible to predict how people will react in situations of extreme trauma, and in this play the range of possible reactions from an individual is wide, as these are no longer determined by a narrowly conceived character or physis. Iphigenia it turns out can summon up a strong sense of moral integrity although as far as we know this had never formed part of her self-concept. Consciously she can turn to the aristocratic notion of nobility (eugeneia) for an ideology that would appear to explain this sudden access of heroic arete, but such an explanation will not do as aristocratic nobility is discredited in this play.25 Iphigenia’s change of mind is neither inconsistency of characterisation nor modification of character in the usual sense. Its occasion is a radical and traumatic change in her circumstances. Her response to the prospect of sacrificial death is not, however, conditioned by a narrow range of possibilities associated with a particular type or class of person. Nobility of spirit, like craven fear, is merely one of a range of human attributes or responses, and there is nothing in the psychology of the play in general or Iphigenia in particular to enable us to predict the one response rather than the other.

Finally we must examine Achilles. Here there is a strong tradition from the Iliad of clearly defined physis and moral integrity. Without these the hero’s horrific and at times macabre dark night of the soul would be all but unintelligible, and the endless blood-letting of his aristea would be nothing but meaningless savagery. But Euripides’ Achilles is perhaps best seen as a man who has read the Iliad and misunderstood it.26 While Homer’s Achilles is really possessed by his thumos, his Euripidean avatar goes through the motions. He is a man for whom the heroic gesture without the substance is sufficient. Euripides’ Achilles has a self-image, but at the cost of self-delusion. Like Homer’s figure he has no desire to be deprived of time by Agamemnon, but Euripides trivialises the character. While the theft of Briseis is in the Iliad a genuine cause for a sense of outrage, in the I.A Agamemnon allegedly slights Achilles by using his name

25 There are frequent references to aristocratic ancestry in this play and although the Greeks not uncommonly employed a patronymic style of address the device is especially remarkable in the I.A (30, 321, 406, 473-74, 504-05, 686, 695ff., 827, 836, 855-56, 896, 901, 903, 946, 949, 975-76, 1030-32, 1106, 1233-34, 1344, 1457).
26 A romanticised view of the epic Achilles is given by the chorus (206-30)
without permission to trick Clytemnestra into sending their daughter to Aulis. Doubtless Agamemnon was somewhat preoccupied; there is no evidence at any rate of a deliberate affront or power struggle such as we find in Iliad I. And although Achilles casts himself as a romantic saviour of Iphigenia and protests against the immorality of her sacrifice, he makes it perfectly clear in a kind of "aside" that he would have let Agamemnon use his name if he had been asked first. 27 Achilles here is the victim of insecurity and he appears fastidious rather than forthright. There is certainly no sign of the hero who hates like Hell's gates the man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another. 28

However the acid test of Achilles' self-concept will be his readiness to follow through his commitment to avert the sacrifice. He seems to have some suspicion of having bitten off more than he can chew when he sensibly, if unheroically, proposes that Clytemnestra should first supplicate Agamemnon and perhaps save him (Achilles) from the awkwardness of falling out with the commander and troops. 29

Achilles does try to defend Iphigenia, but barely escapes being stoned by the army. He intends to continue the fight while Clytemnestra and the mob engage in a sort of impractical and highly indecorous tug-of-war over the girl. 30 Iphigenia meanwhile has determined on voluntary submission. Achilles is so impressed that he now proposes to marry her in earnest, unaware apparently of the irony that her acceptance would call in question the very heroism that inspired the proposal. 31 But Achilles finally does not believe in the girl's heroism, convinced as he is that she will back down at the sight of the sacrificial knife. 32 This is the most cynical moment in the play, for it is as if heroic gestures are enough for Achilles and an unheroic age. But really this should come as no surprise from a man who, while being so preoccupied with mere appearances and so accustomed to entertaining a ridiculously exaggerated view of his capacities, nevertheless retains a foothold in the real world. He can quite genuinely admire Iphigenia's heroics as he can admire his own, but if his countervailing realism, not to say cynicism, makes him doubt her courage, it is more than possible that he doubts his own. The important thing is to preserve the spurious self-concept. In order to do this some validating contact with reality is required, but not too much, for this would burst the bubble.

It is interesting that Achilles goes some of the way towards validating his self-image but not far enough to get himself killed. Admittedly he does not break down. Iphigenia saves him from that, but his heroism is undercut by his moral confusion and dishonesty. Earlier he had condemned the deception and apparently the sacrifice itself as wrong, but only by way of characterising himself as the morally indignant saviour. Co-existing however with this view, half

believed in to support his heroic self-concept, is the incompatible notion that the girl should be sacrificed for the common good. So when she freely consents to die Achilles can abandon his admittedly equivocal condemnation of the sacrifice and commend Iphigenia for doing what is right, necessary and in harmony with divine will.

So although Achilles would seem a more unified character, his position too is shot through with inconsistencies, nor is there any genuine moral integrity to be found in him.

Euripides' characters are notoriously victims. This is underscored by the linked themes of madness and compulsion. The war and the sacrifice which is its prerequisite are frequently characterised as madness. Indeed, insanity and a kind of lust are virtually indistinguishable in Agamemnon's reference to the army's mad, seemingly divinely inspired lust for the war and the ultimate ananke of the play is just this mad desire for the war. The true relationship between freedom and necessity is indicated in Agamemnon's final speech where he sees himself as enslaved not to the will of Menelaus but to that of Greece, for he and his daughter must be slaves of Greece in order to guarantee that Greece will not be enslaved to Trojan barbarians. But of course there is no external threat to Greek freedom; the Greeks have enslaved themselves - to their own mad desires. True freedom is a moral quality that like charity begins at home. But the characters are victims of delusions or misconceptions that utterly compromise any genuine freedom, and the exercise of the will tends to become arbitrary or 'democratic' in Plato's pejorative sense of the word. Menelaus for example declares himself 'bitten' by the will to intercept his brother's mail and in that way announces his autonomy.

The last seven verses of Agamemnon's last speech are filled with words denoting freedom or necessity in various forms. We find in them a paradox: freedom is to be vindicated by the suppression of freedom. A similarly paradoxical agglomeration occurs later when Achilles asserts that Iphigenia will not be sacrificed as far as concerns his will, but Odysseus with the rabble behind him will seize and carry her off against her will. The paradox attaches to Odysseus who is both the tool and the manipulator of the mob, "chosen according to his will". Odysseus, apparently free, can only freely exploit the army's mad desire for the war.

Now the critical difference between such Euripidean protagonists as Medea, Heracles or Phaedra on the one hand and the characters of the I.A. on the other is the presence in the former of a self-concept which is realistic up to a point but
fails to allow for an essential irrational element. The inadequacy is shown up by an attack of unreason felt as something alien but which is really part of the psychic economy of the character. Either the characters of the I.A. have no self-concept at all, being victims of a succession of psychological states or some consuming obsession, or if, as in Achilles' case, there is a self-concept it has little or no contact with reality.

The I.A. together with such plays as the *Orestes* represents the nadir in the history of the disintegration of the heroic integrity. The situation is emphasised in both plays by the juxtaposition of a naive mythic tradition with the brutal world of the late fifth century. In the I.A. the former world is evoked by the chorus in odes that glamorise the war, its heroes and the institution of marriage, while the latter is represented by the dramatic action. Iphigenia's idealistic self-sacrifice is an attempt to close the gap but, imposed as it is on a corrupt world, it can amount at best to little more than an empty gesture and at worst perpetuate the evil, removing the last obstacle to the destructive *eros* of the Greek army. And this is the play's final reality. The irrational passions of the earlier Euripidean plays, while symptomatic of the universal human condition, were largely localised in the chief characters, but in the late plays like the *Orestes, Phoenissae, Bacchae* and I.A. this psychological cancer has spread to society as a whole. Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, and even Odysseus seem but the visible facade. Behind their confused conscious motives lurk, almost in Jungian fashion, their individual unconscious irrationality and behind that the collective unconscious insanity of the mob which they can no more control than their own lives, but which energises their mad endeavours.