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Winning a Bloodless War: The Resurrection of Iphigenia

In the wake of his victory over the suitors, Odysseus leaves a trail of blood: he slices the necks, pierces the chests, and severs the genitals of his foes. In contrast, Euripides' Iphigenia, with the help of Athena and the chorus of Greek women, masterminds a bloodless escape, not with a bow or spear, but instead with words and female solidarity. In *Iphigenia among the Taurians,* Euripides offers Iphigenia as a distinctly feminine hero, a heroine who uses the expectations of Greek women to her advantage, and who, unlike Odysseus, achieves a bloodless and selfless victory.

Iphigenia's core value–her love of family–animate both her means of escape and her definition of victory. Her values dictate her actions in the play. Through Iphigenia's songs of personal lament and treatment of her victims, Euripides emphasizes her love of family and her longing for community. In her introduction, she explains her misfortune: she was lured by marriage to be killed by her father, rescued but taken away from her home and family, and tasked to sacrifice Greek men. Ironically, Artemis instructs Iphigenia to perform the same rituals among the Taurians that would have killed her in Aulis. Although Iphigenia carries some resentment for her father's betrayal and "cannot forget those evils," she most of all laments her separation from her brother Orestes (Euripides 361). When speaking to her chorus of women, she retells a dream she had indicating the death of her brother and mourns never "[lifting her] little brother in [her] arms" (Euripides 373). The father who should protect her, betrays her. The home that once

brought comfort is taken away. She does not condemn her family and Greece, but instead, she misses her brother and her home. Above revenge and resentment, she craves connection and family. Iphigenia puts aside her resentment, lets go of the wrongs of the past, and focuses on the goals of the present. Her escape is not motivated by revenge or personal grudges; instead, she cherishes and protects the familial connection she has left.

Just as Iphigenia values her own family connections, she values the family connections of others. In her first encounter with the men she is instructed to sacrifice, she asks “Have you a sister? Robbed of two young men like you she will be brotherless now” (Euripides 473-474). Iphigenia seeks an emotional connection with her victims, inquiring about their families even when she plays a part in their deaths. Her specific inquiry about sisters highlights her sympathy for other women who have lost their families. Although tasked with a cruel duty, Iphigenia humanizes her victims, acknowledging their families and sympathizing with women who long for their brothers. Despite her suffering and sorrows, Iphigenia is a caring individual who values human connection.

In contrast, Odysseus values both family and revenge. As a Greek man, Odysseus’ restoration of his family is deeply tied to his reputation. He benefits from having a faithful wife, a brave son, and a strong household. When all is disrupted by the herd of suitors in his absence, he aims to get revenge, not only to preserve his family but also to uphold his glory and reputation. Unlike Iphigenia, he does not let go of his resentment against the suitors, and the story revolves around his eventual revenge as he “will not keep [his] hands away from slaughter until [he] pays [the] suitors back for all [their] wickedness” (Homer 22.63-65). Odysseus values his glory over his emotional connection with others, making his journey as a hero more selfish. He defeats anything in his way to restore his reputation. Odysseus' story focuses on his revenge,

whereas Iphigenia's story focuses on her reunion with Orestes and his safe return home. Because they have different personal values, Iphigenia and Odysseus go about achieving their victory in different ways. Although they are both cunning and deceitful, Euripides presents the unique advantages and abilities of a Greek woman. Iphigenia's methods are less violent and more subtle than Odysseus': she crafts elaborate lies and relies on the silence of her female community.

Iphigenia uses her experience as a suffering Greek woman to her advantage. She calls on the chorus of women in the temple to aid her escape. Throughout the play, the chorus serves as the voice of suffering women like Iphigenia who miss their homes and families. They cry out, singing they are "a bird without wings, longing for Greek marketplace" and miss dancing at "fancy weddings… alongside [their] girlfriends" (Euripides 1145, 1147). They share the same feminine experiences at home, making their sadness, memories, and joys not of one, but of a community. Just as they share the same joyful memories of home, they endure the same sorrows in Tauris. In this way, they foster a special female community centered around remembrance of the past and grief of the present. Iphigenia appeals to the chorus to help her escape, saying, "we are women, as a species devoted to one another, staunch in defending our common interests" (Euripides 1060-1061). Iphigenia draws on their emotional connection to gain the women's support. Because the women relate to Iphigenia's longing for home and care for her brother, they agree to stay quiet to help deceive the king. Iphigenia's solidarity with these women proves useful; their shared sorrows motivate the women to help her escape.

This community of women is a stark contrast to the community of men portrayed in the Odyssey. The community of men, the suitors, does not connect over sympathy and emotion, but rather, over competition. As the men are all trying to win Penelope's hand in marriage, they are quick to fight and insult one another. Accepting Penelope's challenge to string Odysseus' bow

and arrow, the suitors mock each other and argue over who are “actual warriors” (Homer 21.174). They are not a community bonded together by solidarity and emotion, but instead, by rivalry. To succeed, Odysseus must defeat these rivals. In offering Iphigenia as a heroine, backed by female allies, Euripides offers a striking contrast: cooperation, not competition, aids Iphigenia’s escape. She seeks allies and finds them.

Furthermore, after escaping the Taurians’ attack and facing the tortuous waves of Poseidon, Iphigenia seeks the help of Athena, a goddess. She prays for Athena’s help in their journey, asking, “You surely love your brother, goddess. Know that I too love my kin” (Euripides 1401-1402). Like the chorus of women, Iphigenia relates her situation to Athena’s, drawing on shared emotional experience. Iphigenia has a special connection to Athena–shared womanhood. Iphigenia appeals to Athena as both a god and a woman who prioritizes family, earning her sympathy and support through words and emotion.

In addition to Iphigenia’s methods of appealing to the shared experiences of women, she also uses the societal expectations of Greek women to advance her escape. In Greek society, women are expected to be subservient to men and silent unless instructed to talk. Iphigenia uses her cunning to fool the king into letting the two strangers and the statue leave while the entire city is blindfolded. The king even praises her plan, saying “Greece raised [Iphigenia] to be clever” and that her “piety and forethought are impeccable” (Euripides 1180, 1202). King Thoas’ immediate trust in Iphigenia's plan speaks to her reputation as an obedient Greek woman he trusts. The king believes her elaborate plan and allows her to take two strangers and a valuable statue near a means of escape. Iphigenia does not escape in darkness. She even tells the king her plan. Instead of a bow and arrow or a spear, she relies on her reputation of obedience to defy the king, save Orestes and Pylades, and return home. Euripides' action relies on subtlety and

subterfuge. Iphigenia is no less brave or cunning than her Homerian counterpart. Through her, Euripides offers audiences a way to imagine victory without the traditional weapons of war. Although Odysseus fashions a similar deceitful escape of the Cyclops, he uses both cunning and violence. He earns special ire from Poseidon because he stabs the Cyclops in the eye. Iphigenia, on the other hand, while also intelligent and cunning, never relies on violence.

Because Iphigenia has different values as a heroine and different means of achieving escape, Euripides' story provides a different perspective of victory: one that is selfless and bloodless. When reuniting with her brother and forming plans to escape, Iphigenia reveals her main objective, saying to Orestes “I want what you want: to release you from troubles and restore our ailing ancestral home – for I’ve no anger left for my killer” (Euripides 991-993). Although Iphigenia has experienced betrayal and loss in her family, she has no motivation to get revenge on those who wronged her. Even though her father attempted to kill her, and her mother killed her father, and her brother killed her mother, she has no desire to continue this cycle of vengeful killing. Even in her role of sacrificing Greek men, she experiences no satisfaction from this killing. She has the opportunity to kill her brother to avenge her mother, but she never considers it. Instead, Iphigenia stops the cycle of murder in her family, straying away from patterns of revenge and turning toward restoration and renewal. She prioritizes the well-being of her brother and their relationship over any personal grudges and glory. Iphigenia masterminds a successful escape without bloodshed, creating a victory for both her and her brother. In this way, Iphigenia’s victory is the restoration of her relationship with her brother. Her value of family and relationships connects her with the chorus of women, gaining their support. Her intentional persona of obedience and submission makes her deception of the King inconspicuous. Her ability to break the cycle of revenge and instead look towards restoration leads her not just to her own

victory but to the victory of others around her. Orestes is rescued yet again and the women of the chorus are to return home.

As for Iphigenia, she is decreed by Athena to “die and be buried” in the “holy meadows of Brauron” (Euripides 1462-1465). Her death in *Iphigenia among the Taurians* emphasizes her unique power, courage, and selflessness. Euripides resurrects Iphigenia from Aulis to give her story a better ending. In *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, she is no longer a helpless victim or sacrifice, but a strong heroine who dies and is buried in honor. By giving Iphigenia a voice, Euripides provides an alternative perspective of what it means to live and die a hero. She does not fight off monsters or slit the throats of suitors or gain personal glory. She fights not with weapons of steel, but with words. She preserves not her life, but her family. Iphigenia’s story proves the power of being a subtle and feminine hero–one who can use words and shared emotions to make change. Only this kind of hero can stop a cycle of violence and show how love and cunning win a bloodless war.

Works Cited

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Homer. *The Odyssey.* Translated by Emily Wilson, W. W. Norton, 2018.