

IF, AGAIN...

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...(*Iphigenia*) is built around an obscenity of (a) death, the death(s) of Iphigenia, whose body, at first seemingly alive, then rendered a corpse (several times over), and later appearing as a revenant in humanimal form (human but horned), occupies center stage for the full length of the performance. The scene is all too familiar. It is multiply told and retold in Greek mythology and tragedy through a string of variations, and it recalls a further proliferation of violences done to women in our own time. With each telling, Iphigenia is murdered again and again.

The most brutal of these retellings is the briefest. In Aeschylus, Iphigenia's sacrifice is contained in a mere twenty lines of a report sung by the Chorus of Argive elders who bear witness to what took place at Aulis. With its cameo-like brevity, Aeschylus' version captures the violence of the scene as no other ancient version does. It is a picture of muted horror:

Once he [Agamemnon] had placed his neck beneath the harness
of what had to be,
he veered the breathings of his thought to godless,
rank impiety.
From then he turned his mind to foster plans of
sheer audacity—
for clever, scheming madness, trouble-starting,
can make people bold.
And so he steeled his hand to grasp his daughter's
sacrificial blade;
did all this to support a war of vengeance
for a woman's bed.
They count as nothing all her 'father'-cries, her
pleas, her virgin-years,
those battle-loving lords. The father tells his men
to pray and then to raise
her high above the altar like a goat-kid
for the sacrifice;
with all their will to hold her and her trailing
robes in readiness,
neck facing down. They tie a fetter round her
lovely cheeks and face,
a gag to hold her tongue from words to put her
house beneath a curse.

They used the bridle's brutal force
to muffle up her voice;
and as her saffron-tinted cloth
fell pouring to the earth,
she shot each leader standing by
an arrow from her eye,
imploping pity. Beauty standing out
as in a painting,
she longed to call out all their names,
since there were many times
she'd sung the maiden paean-hymn
within her father's hall,
to chime with their third good-luck toast,
and grace her father's feast.

(*Agamemnon* 218–48; tr. Taplin, slightly adapted)

The last strophe ends with a song within a song, except that the inner song is never heard at this time and will never be heard again. Iphigenia's singing voice is put into parenthesis, brutally muffled, reduced to a mute icon of itself ('as in a painting'), yet longing for release, just as the scene itself operates like a dramatic parenthesis, suspending all forward action and pausing time itself, a bated breath.

In Euripides' version of the sacrifice, in his *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the parenthesis around Iphigenia stretches for an entire play and ends with her invocation to dance 'about the altar of Artemis, / about her temple' (1480–4), itself a repetition of her innocent joyous invitation to her father to inaugurate her nuptial rites (a promissory ruse that brought her to Aulis): 'Then round the altar shall we start the dance?' (676)¹ The question has no answer, and no one dances. Suspended, the play's final action is left open, shrouded in uncertainty, following the indications of the myth: Was Iphigenia murdered? Was she rescued by Artemis and replaced with a deer? Even Aeschylus shrewdly hints at this last alternative and its blink-of-an-eye magic-trick quality, with the phrase 'like a goat-kid'—in which case, the ensuing cycle of tragic revenge that the sacrifice unleashes was all for naught, just as the Trojan War was according to some ancient tellings fought over an empty phantom fashioned by the gods (the image of Helen)—another substitution in the realm of the Imaginary that nonetheless produces horrific effects in the Real.²

Iphigenia never dies in these versions, not only because of the mythical uncertainties that attend her fate and the confused endings of Euripides' own play³ but also because she arrives caught in the spectral space between being

1. Tr. Walker in Griffith and Most (2013b).

2. This is one of the many marked differences that separate the binding of Iphigenia from that of Isaac, for all their haunting similarities.

3. See Telò and Griffith (this issue).

always-already-dead and not-yet-dead-again, the ever-vulnerable space of an ‘if, again’. Wayne Shorter and esperanza spalding’s jazz-opera creation, ...(*Iphigenia*), reenacts the same tragic parenthesis on several levels: first in its title, where Iphigenia’s name is displayed, bracketed, and muted all at once, then in reverting to the play by Euripides, where the action is parenthetically left open, but also (inevitably) to Aeschylus, whose version of events never ceased to haunt the tradition, and finally by releasing—ungagging—Iphigenia’s voice operatically. In Shorter and spalding’s production, Iphigenia cannot help but recall the patriarchal violence done to women down to our own day even as it celebrates the creative counterforces of contemporary black culture in this powerful reimagining of an ancient theme.

We see the problem of iterative violence literally laid out before us in the unexplained opening scenes of the opera in which Iphigenia is slain five times by the grotesquely and comically hypermasculine Argive soldiers, each of the victims marked out in brightly colored dresses in a range of hues, from lime green to blood red to saffron. Slain one by one, they stretch across the stage in a single line, and then rise again, as if from the dead, to sing. The movement is from a still-death tableau (another mute icon) to a sonically rich interplay of plural Iphigenian voices, each endowed with a distinct timbre, each a different calque on operatic singing. But they do not simply sing. Rather, they *mimic* the act of singing by histrionically multiplying the different instances of Iphigenia, past, present, and future, and by occupying different vocal registers and styles, some more improvisational and jazz-like, others more classically disciplined and operatic. Collectively, the voices create an emancipated ‘meta-voice’ that is irreducible to any one of them alone.⁴ Floating above the voices is the storyboard libretto in which the figures of Iphigenia appear in different guises and names, culminating in Iphigenia of the Open Tense, spalding herself, who is seemingly ready to fly away in her silver spacesuit, though she remains stage-bound to the end, fully committed to her sororal and not filial duties,⁵ and who condenses in her person the singular plurality that Iphigenia is.

As the performance underscores, there can be no one Iphigenia but only Iphigenia again, the always-already-and-yet-to-be-dead-again heroine, each new iteration rehearsing the last, each posing the possibility of either a continuation or a rupture with the series. ‘Consider the death of Iphigenia under the sacrificial knife’, writes Nicole Loraux in her *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, ‘an exemplary death that none of the three great tragedians failed to recall (*évoquer*), and more than once.’⁶ The tradition can never have done

4. See Mackey (1997), 206–8, for the term.

5. She stands with her peers in solidarity, as Butler notes (this issue).

6. Loraux (1987), 32, tr. slightly modified; emphasis added. See *ibid.*, 43f., for a deft study of the haunting echoes of Aeschylus in Euripides. Such echoes are the very stuff of tragedy in its metareflective states.

with Iphigenia. It repeatedly says to itself, 'Iphigenia, again[...]'.⁷ Unless, if not again...

The repetitive play between loss and (a) gain, the ruptural break around a hiatus that can never be quite heard but only felt, is the paradoxical core of Greek tragedy, which is governed by a drive to the death that is simultaneously instinct with life and creativity, each iteration a protest against what it must nonetheless make present once more. In the case of Iphigenia, every retelling of her final moments opens the parenthesis of her death scene and stretches it yet one more time in a new direction. How often must Iphigenia die? How many deaths must she undergo? How often must we watch? When will it all end? Does the performance we are now watching break with or continue its predecessors in the open present tense in which we take it in? The Greek tragedians were keenly aware of the burden that came with inserting themselves into a self-resistant tradition, one that was defined not by Aristotle's claim about the bitter-sweet pain-pleasure proper to tragedy that ends in cathartic release but by the double-bind of a spectacle that captivates and affronts the eye. This is the open secret of tragedy's oppressive character whose clearest enunciation also happens to be found in Aeschylus.

Agamemnon opens with a prologue featuring a Watchman who is perched 'like a dog' on the roof of the royal palace at Argos, scanning the horizon for beacons signaling his king's return from Troy. As his name implies, the Watchman is a figure for spectating, and for us. Astonishingly, he is portrayed as an unwilling observer who is obliged to carry out his role under the threat of severe punishment and despite the physical and psychological discomfort of sleepless nights, of terror at the responsibility of his assignment, and of a mind divided between hope for his master's speedy return and a dreaded anticipation of what is to come—and what the audience already knows is to come (the story is all too familiar). The apotropaic figure of the Watchman who says 'Watch but don't look' reappears in ...(*Iphigenia*) in the person of the Usher (doubling as the goddess Artemis), who in *Sprechstimme* urges us not to accept what we are about to witness and tries, without success, to interrupt the proceedings. Here, too, ... (*Iphigenia*) is faithful to the ancient tradition in abetting and inhibiting the scopoc urge. Artemis embodies this double bind in her person: It is she who exacts the penalty of sacrifice from Agamemnon and then, in some tellings, whisks his daughter away to safety.

One of the glaring absences in the work might be thought to be its lack of revenge for the wrongs it presents. But ...(*Iphigenia*) is not organized around revenge.⁸ Nor is it a complacent iteration of a preestablished pattern. The work neither succumbs to the tradition nor does it triumph over it. The delicate balance it strikes is a source of the work's frustrations (it wants to get free of

7. Loraux (1987), 38.

8. See Griffith (this issue).

the tragedy of female victimage) and of its creative joy (scat nearly scatters the dark clouds). Instead, it works with and against its tragic forebears—with, by remembering and staging in a remarkable surfeit the multiple deaths of Iphigenia look-alikes that have accumulated over the millennia since antiquity, and by actualizing the resistances to violence that are hardwired into the tradition itself; against, through a kind of intransigence, as Iphigenia refuses to be muted but instead floods the hall with her rich polyvocality, and by producing a genre that as yet has no name and likely never will: jazz, opera, multimedia performance, jazz opera?

...(*Iphigenia*), then, is an improvisation on and with antiquity. It produces itself as a collaborative antagonism and fusion of white, black, and blurred contemporary forms that are at once contrapuntal, interanimating, and mutually expansive—an original remix. The work operates on and in a break, in a hiatus, and within an open parenthesis, as a draft version of itself awaiting further revision, audition, and re-view. It is, we might say, ‘the ongoing event of an antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of the birth and rebirth of a new science [of *logos*, of acoustics, of value], a phylogenetic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis’, and in this way marks its difference from sameness.⁹

9. Moten (2003), 14.