EURIPIDES AND THE IPHIGENIA LEGEND

BY

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The tradition which Euripides follows in the Iphigenia plays—the only ones of his in which Iphigenia figures as a character—is that, as she was about to be sacrificed at Aulis by her father Agamemnon, Artemis, for whom the sacrifice was intended, intervened. For the human victim the goddess substituted a deer, and Iphigenia herself was translated to the Tauric Chersonese, where she was installed as Artemis' own priestess in charge of the human sacrifices of that region. This, however—together with the mass of legend that grew up around the notion of a “surviving” Iphigenia—was not the only tradition, nor, in the extant drama, is it the most prominent one. Both Aeschylus and Sophocles refer to Iphigenia as having been actually killed at Aulis, and in fact make this circumstance one of the main causes of Clytemnestra’s hatred of her husband and of her murdering him on his return from Troy. That there should have been varying and inconsistent stories is hardly surprising in view of the well-known flexibility and capacity for growth of the Greek legends generally. What is surprising, however, is that in the Iphigenia in Tauris—the very play that deals with the later fortunes of Iphigenia—the contrary tradition, that at Aulis she met her death, plays a definite part.

The relevant sections occur in conversations between Iphigenia and Orestes:

(a) Ιρ. τί δέ; σφαγείαις θυγατρός ἔστι τις λόγος;
Ορ. οὐδεὶς γε, πλὴν θανόσαν οἷοι ὄραν φάος.
Ιφ. τάλαιν ἐκείνη γιὸ κτανὼν αὖθιν πατήρ.

It is not easy to know what to make of these passages in their entirety. Where Iphigenia refers to herself as "the daughter who was killed" and "she who was slain at Aulis" she may mean no more than "who was (or is) supposed to have been killed", though her language is probably meant to be somewhat paradoxical 1). But three things seem fairly clear: first, Iphigenia, quite apart from anything that Orestes tells her, assumes that her family, and her people generally, have been thinking of her as dead (cf. \(\epsilon \sigma \varphi \alpha \zeta \epsilon \nu \epsilon \), \(\theta \omega \kappa \tau \) (v. 8)), and her words \(\alpha \nu \gamma ' \sigma \nu \varepsilon ' \varepsilon \alpha \lambda \varphi \nu \) etc. are apparently intended to convey new information. Secondly, Orestes has in fact been thinking of her as dead; the \(\sigma \tau \theta \epsilon \nu \oomicron \varepsilon \theta \) of the first passage and the \(\chi \theta \theta \oomicron \theta \nu \tau \) of the second are quite unambiguous, and the bewilderment, incredulity and joyful surprise that he successively evinces in this well-known recognition scene are perfectly genuine. Indeed it is these that give to the episode its fine dramatic quality—arising, as they evidently do, not simply from his finding his sister among the Taurians, but from his finding her alive at all. Thirdly, the Greeks in general, as Orestes declares, know nothing of Iphigenia except that "having died, she no longer beholds the light".

1) \(\gamma \nu \) in v. 784 is much best taken to refer to \(\epsilon \lambda \varphi \nu \). But Paley, who refers it to \(\mu \), need not, in view of \(\sigma \varphi \alpha \zeta \epsilon \sigma ' \) (v. 770), have suggested \(\theta \omega \nu e \) ("conative" imperfect) for \(\theta \omega \nu e \). Such an imperfect, however, is to be seen in \(\epsilon \kappa \alpha \nu \omega \nu \varphi \eta \nu \) (v. 27). With the \(\sigma \varphi \alpha \zeta \epsilon \sigma \zeta \sigma ' \) of v. 563 and the \(\sigma \varphi \alpha \zeta \epsilon \sigma ' \) of v. 770 cf. "\(\epsilon \lambda \lambda \delta \) \(\mu ' \alpha \pi \omega \lambda \epsilon \sigma ' \) (v. 1187)—though here there may be something of a double meaning—"killed", "ruined".