Cambridge Translations from Greek Drama

Euripides

Iphigeneia at Aulis

A new translation and commentary by Holly Eckhardt and John Harrison

Introduction to the Greek Theatre by P. E. Easterling

Series Editors: John Harrison and Judith Affleck
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Preface

The aim of the series is to enable students to approach Classical plays with confidence and understanding: to discover the play within the text.

The translations are new. Many recent versions of Greek tragedy have been produced by poets and playwrights who do not work from the original Greek. The translators of this series aim to bring readers, actors and directors as close as possible to the playwrights’ actual words and intentions: to create translations which are faithful to the original in content and tone; and which are speakable, with all the immediacy of modern English.

The notes are designed for students of Classical Civilisation and Drama, and indeed anyone who is interested in theatre. They address points which present difficulty to the reader of today: chiefly relating to the Greeks’ religious and moral attitudes, their social and political life, and mythology.

Our hope is that students should discover the play for themselves. The conventions of the Classical theatre are discussed, but there is no thought of recommending ‘authentic’ performances. Different groups will find different ways of responding to each play. The best way of bringing alive an ancient play, as any other, is to explore the text practically, to stimulate thought about ways of staging the plays today. Stage directions in the text are minimal, and the notes are not prescriptive; rather, they contain questions and exercises which explore the dramatic qualities of the text. Bullet points introduce suggestions for discussion and analysis; open bullet points focus on more practical exercises.

If the series encourages students to attempt a staged production, so much the better. But the primary aim is understanding and enjoyment.

This translation of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is based on the Greek text edited by J. Diggle for Oxford University Press.

John Harrison
Judith Affleck
Background to the story of Iphigeneia at Aulis

THE JUDGEMENT OF PARIS
Zeus had fallen in love with the sea-nymph Thetis when he received a prophecy from Prometheus the Titan that the son of Thetis was destined to be more powerful than his father. Fearing that his position as king of the gods was threatened, Zeus arranged for Thetis to be married to a mortal, so that her son would also be mortal. So Thetis was betrothed to the mortal Peleus.

The wedding of Peleus and Thetis was a joyous occasion to which all the gods and goddesses were invited, with one exception. Eris, the goddess of quarrel, had been excluded for fear that she would spoil the happy event. When she found out about the wedding, she turned up unexpectedly at the feast to bring her present for the happy couple. Her gift was a golden apple bearing the inscription ‘For the fairest’. The goddesses Hera, queen of the gods, Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Aphrodite, goddess of love, all claimed that the golden apple was rightfully theirs and it was decided that an impartial judge should be sought. Paris, the most handsome mortal, a Trojan prince who was then a shepherd on Mount Ida near Troy, was chosen for the job. Each goddess offered Paris a reward if he were to pick her. Hera offered him power, Athena offered him wisdom, and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris awarded the golden apple to Aphrodite, and as a result he was promised Helen, who was not only the most beautiful woman, but also the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta.

Paris set off to claim his reward. When he arrived in Sparta, Menelaus was away from home in Crete, and Paris took Helen home with him to Troy – either willingly or by force. When Menelaus returned, he and his brother Agamemnon raised an expedition against Troy to recover Helen. So the judgement of Paris can be said to have been the cause of the Trojan War.

THE UPBrINGING OF ACHILLES
The son born to Peleus and Thetis was Achilles. When he was a baby, according to some versions, his mother tried to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx, but he was still vulnerable in the heel, by which she held him. Peleus sent his son to be educated by his old tutor, the Centaur Cheiron, on Mount Pelion. As the Greek armies were gathering for the expedition to Troy, Thetis, knowing that Achilles might either live a long and inglorious life or win glory at Troy and die young, disguised him as a girl and hid him at the court of King Lycomedes on the island of Scyros, to try to save him from going to war. During his time on Scyros, the princess Deidameia bore him a son,
Neoptolemus. Because the Greeks needed Achilles’ prowess, Odysseus tracked him down on Scyros, where he left some armour in the women’s quarters. Achilles betrayed himself by the interest with which he handled it, and joined the fleet as it gathered at Aulis.

**The first production of Iphigeneia at Aulis**

Euripides left Athens in 408 BC to go to live at the court of King Achelaus of Macedonia, where he died two years later. His old rival Sophocles led the mourning for him at the festival of Dionysia in Athens. Three of his plays received their first performance posthumously: *Iphigeneia at Aulis, Alcmæon in Corinth* (now lost) and *Bacchae*, probably in 405 BC. They were awarded the first prize, for only the fifth time in a long career. There is some evidence that they were produced by Euripides’ son; it is not certain whether the plays were finished when the dramatist died.

**A note on the text**

*Iphigeneia* has survived thanks to a single printed manuscript (Venice, 1503). There are more uncertainties about this text than most of Euripides’ plays and it is possible that changes – including additions – were made even before the first performance. The unusual structure of the Prologue suggests to some that there may have originally been two versions. The ending too – from the Messenger’s entry – has also been questioned, especially the passage relating the ‘miracle’ (1537–end). The text as it stands certainly has unusual features, but none seems impossible for such an innovative dramatist as Euripides; in its present state it makes for powerful stage performance.

**Further reading**

The authors would like to acknowledge help in particular from Pantelis Michelakis, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006.


Map of Ancient Greece
Clytaemnestra and Iphigeneia (from Cacoyannis’ film Ifigeneia, 1977)