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978-1-107-60116-1 – Euripides: Iphigeneia at Aulis
Holly Eckhardt and John Harrison
Excerpt
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List of characters

AGAMEMNON	<i>king of Argos and commander of the expedition against Troy</i>
OLD MAN	<i>a slave, servant of Agamemnon</i>
CHORUS	<i>young married women of Chalcis</i>
MENELAUS	<i>king of Sparta, brother of Agamemnon and husband of Helen</i>
MESSENGER 1	<i>from Argos, in Clytaemnestra's entourage</i>
CLYTAEMNESTRA	<i>wife of Agamemnon</i>
IPHIGENEIA	<i>daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra</i>
ACHILLES	<i>prince of Phthia, leader of the Myrmidons</i>
MESSENGER 2	<i>a soldier sent by Agamemnon</i>

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[More information](#)**PROLOGUE (1–157)**

The Prologue is the part of a Greek play that precedes the entry of the Chorus. Euripides rarely begins a play as he does here, with a dramatic dialogue between two characters. He usually starts with a single character who gives the background to the situation, in the way Agamemnon does in lines 49–114. The two sections of dialogue, lines 1–48 and 115–57, which frame Agamemnon's speech are in an anapaestic rhythm, used for animated speech. Agamemnon's long speech is in iambic trimeters, the usual metre of tragic dialogue.

Setting of the play

The action takes place in a single day in Aulis, on the Boeotian side of the Euripus strait which separates the island of Euboea from the Greek mainland (see map, p. vii). The Greek fleet had assembled here ready to set sail to wage war against Troy. The army is unable to sail because of the lack of wind (10), and so the Greeks have set up a temporary camp of makeshift tents (1) while they wait for more favourable conditions.

Agamemnon the leader

Agamemnon, son of Atreus (29), is a major character in the story of the Trojan War. As leader of the Greek campaign, he plays a prominent role in the *Iliad* and in Greek tragedy. In the *Iliad* he is presented as a brave fighter but a flawed character: aggressive, quarrelsome and also irresolute. However, Euripides always felt free to adapt characters to his own design. Here Agamemnon is shown in private, with his slave, in a state of agitation.

6 What is that bright star This star is probably Sirius (which is the Greek word for 'bright'), the Dog Star, visible in the hottest days of summer. The Pleiades are a constellation of seven stars. The stars were important to the Greeks for navigation and play a large role in myths. This reference both fixes the action in summer time (though the play was performed in the spring) and adds a note of foreboding. Sirius was for Homer a sign of evil, bringing fever.

Burden of responsibility (17–23)

In Greek literature there is often a tension between an individual's public responsibilities to the community and private obligations to their family. As a leader Agamemnon has a duty to his men, but this is accompanied by its own pressures (23).

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- AGAMEMNON** Old Man, come out of the tent. 1
- OLD MAN** I'm coming. What are you up to now, Lord Agamemnon?
- AGAMEMNON** Hurry!
- OLD MAN** I'm coming, I'm coming.
 There's no rest for the aged; my eyes are sore. 5
- AGAMEMNON** What is that bright star I see
 Still shining in mid-heaven,
 Crossing the Pleiades with their seven paths?
 There's no sound either of birds
 Or of the sea. The silence of the wind 10
 Grips the strait.
- OLD MAN** Why are you rushing about out here,
 Agamemnon?
 All is still quiet over Aulis
 And the guards on the walls have not moved. 15
 Let's go inside.
- AGAMEMNON** I envy you, Old Man, and I envy any man
 Who lives life free from danger, unnoticed and obscure.
 Those in authority I envy less.
- OLD MAN** But status makes for a good life. 20
- AGAMEMNON** Yes, but that good life is slippery:
 Honour may be sweet,
 But it brings suffering.

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[More information](#)**Demands of religion**

The Greeks did not have a word for ‘religion’; the notion of ‘piety’ (*eusebeia*) comes closest to the idea – the need to appease the powerful but volatile gods, who were thought to resent human success and prosperity. Mortals must avoid exceeding their proper human limits in their dealings with gods or men (*hubris*). Piety was concerned with the performance of traditional rituals and the observance of traditional modes of restrained behaviour and thought. ‘Neglect of the gods’ (24) risked punishment (*nemesis*) or retribution from the gods. In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, Pentheus, king of Thebes, refuses to worship the god Dionysus. The god asserts his power, driving the women of Thebes into a frenzy in which Pentheus is torn to pieces by his own mother. Caution requires that mortals should always try to ascertain the gods’ will (90).

Nobility

The Greeks expected those of noble birth (line 28) to display all-round excellence (*aretē*), including superior moral qualities, and thus fulfil their obligations to the wider community. In the heroic code of the *Iliad*, heroes fought for glory and honour, accepting their lot without complaint. Tragic heroines too responded to the demands of nobility: Antigone in Sophocles’ *Antigone* chooses to die rather than renounce her religious and family obligations; and Polyxena in Euripides’ *Hecuba* chooses death rather than the life of a slave. Agamemnon’s questioning of his role (17–19, 21–3) marks him out from the conventional hero. See ‘**Honour and reputation**’, p. 28.

30 You are mortal Achilles, speaking to Priam at the end of the *Iliad*, declares that no mortal can live without some misfortune. See ‘**The human condition**’, p. 14 (also 156).

35 this tablet in your hand The writing tablet was probably a wooden booklet, hinged down the middle, and could be sealed on the outside. The inside probably contained smooth wax on which a message could be etched. It is an important prop in the play, and will feature again (110, 284–305).

45 an honest and trustworthy man In Euripides’ plays the humble characters, such as the Old Man here, a long-standing slave of the family (46–8), are often depicted as wise and loyal.

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Sometimes neglect of the gods Topples a man's life, Sometimes the ruthless criticism of our fellow men Crushes it to pieces.	25
OLD MAN I don't like to hear a man of noble birth talk like this. Agamemnon, Atreus did not father you for blessings from start to finish.	
You are mortal, Born for pain as well as joy, Whether you like it or not. That is the will of the gods. But here you are, With this tablet in your hand, writing away By torch light, Rubbing out and rewriting what you've already written, Opening and resealing it And weeping heavy tears; And then you throw it to the ground.	30
You seem to have taken leave of your senses. What's tormenting you? What is this new problem? Come now, share it with me. You'll be speaking to an honest and trustworthy man.	35 40 45

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46 Tyndareus The father of Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife (47). See '**Leda's children**' below.

Marriage and dowries

When a young Greek girl married, she passed from the authority of her father to that of her husband. The legal contract was sealed with a dowry (47), usually a chest containing a sum of money or valuables which was held in trust for her throughout her married life. The bride's family would provide this. Here the dowry included the gift of an old servant.

Agamemnon's speech

The naturalistic dialogue is interrupted by a long speech giving background information necessary for the audience, but probably largely familiar to the Old Man. This structure is unusual, but in performance seems to present no difficulty (see *A note on the text*, p. vi).

Leda's children

Tyndareus and his wife Leda had four children: the twin boys Castor and Pollux (see 742n) and Clytaemnestra and Helen. In most accounts Zeus was the father of the twins and of Helen; in the form of a swan he seduced Leda, and Helen hatched from an egg laid by her mother. Phoebe (50) is not often mentioned as one of Leda's daughters.

Tyndareus' predicament

An unmarried girl was considered to be under the power of her father, and it would have been for Tyndareus to decide which suitor would marry his daughter. As the competition to woo Helen was fierce, the suitors' emotions were running dangerously high (53–4) and Tyndareus had to find a way to resolve the situation amicably.

Oaths, sacrifices and libations

Oaths in the ancient world were not taken lightly; an oath was a sworn vow made in the name of the gods, and Zeus was the deity responsible for them. In a largely oral society, agreements were made under oath and the gods acted as guarantors to such agreements. Such contracts were then sealed, as commonly now, by the shaking of hands (59). Sacrifices (60), of the first fruits of a harvest or a young animal, and libations (61), the pouring out of milk, wine or olive oil on to the ground, were performed to encourage the gods to witness the agreement.

65 Greek or barbarian See '**Barbarians and Troy**', p. 8.

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For long ago, Tyndareus
 Sent me to your wife as part of her dowry,
 An honest attendant for the bride.

AGAMEMNON Leda, daughter of Thestius, had three daughters,
 Phoebe, Clytaemnestra, my wife, 50
 And Helen. The most prosperous young men of Greece
 Came as suitors to Helen.
 There arose great jealousy among them and
 Each uttered dreadful threats against the others,
 Should he not get the girl. 55

It was hard for her father Tyndareus to know
 Whether to give her or not to give her, how best to handle the situation.
 And this solution came to him:
 That the suitors should take oaths, clasp hands
 And, with burnt sacrifices, 60
 Pour out libations and swear that,
 No matter who won Tyndareus' daughter as his wife,
 They should all unite to help him, if any man should take her
 from her home.
 And they should wage war against that man
 And destroy his city, be it Greek or barbarian, 65
 If he should drive her husband from the marriage bed.

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70 the sweet breath of Aphrodite In early Greek thought, passion was linked to a deity. The name of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, is a metonym here, standing for sexual desire. Tyndareus allows Helen to choose her own husband (69) according to her fancy, and so relieves himself of the responsibility of making a decision.

71 Menelaus Brother of Agamemnon and king of Sparta.

72 Paris . . . beauty contest See *Background to the story*, p. v.

Barbarians and Troy

Homer does not talk of ‘barbarians’ in the *Iliad*; the Trojans were as civilised as the Greeks. But after their success in repelling the Persian invasions, the Greeks tended to look down on those who came from the east. ‘Barbarian’ (originally one who could not speak Greek, but seemed to say ‘ba-ba-ba’) is a fifth-century BC word. Agamemnon adopts the attitudes of many of Euripides’ contemporaries, who would have viewed themselves as free and civilised, and classed Asians as slaves, luxurious (‘barbarian splendour’, 74), emotional, cruel and immoral (see 1365–6).

75 He lusted after Helen, and she for him Agamemnon states that Helen was not an unwilling victim of abduction, but that she and Paris had mutual feelings, and so she bears some responsibility for the consequences. See ‘**Helen’s guilt**’, p. 54.

Guest-friendship

The early Greeks set up networks of guest-friends as they travelled the ancient world. They formed bonds of trust (*xenia*) that required them to offer hospitality and help to their guests and hosts. *Xenia* was protected by Zeus, and anyone who broke the rules of hospitality would be punished for their *hubris* (see ‘**Demands of religion**’, p. 4). Paris broke the rules by seducing Helen, his host Menelaus’ wife (76). (See *Background to the story*, p. v.) The Greeks are now seeking their revenge.

77 his cow-shed on Ida Ida is the mountain range close to Troy. Agamemnon’s choice of words reflects his contempt for Paris.

81 the Greeks sprang up, armed and ready for battle The language here is reminiscent of Homer, and recalls the arming scenes of the *Iliad*.

85 they chose me to lead Agamemnon’s sentiments towards leadership here (87) recall his earlier words (17–23).

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And when they had pledged themselves – how well old
 Tyndareus got round them with his shrewd mind –
 He allowed his daughter to choose from the suitors the one
 To whom the sweet breath of Aphrodite drew her. 70
 And she chose Menelaus. If only he'd rejected her!
 The story goes that Paris, who had been the judge
 Of the goddesses' beauty contest, came to Sparta from Troy,
 Flamboyant in his style of dress and gleaming with gold,
 barbarian splendour.
 He lusted after Helen, and she for him, 75
 And when Menelaus was away from home, he seduced her
 And returned to his cow-shed on Ida.
 Menelaus, enraged, rushed round Greece,
 And he reminded people of their former oaths to Tyndareus,
 Saying that they must help those who have been wronged. 80
 At this the Greeks sprang up, armed and ready for battle,
 And came to the base here at Aulis with its narrow strait,
 With many ships and armour,
 And squadrons of horse and chariots.
 And they chose me to lead the campaign 85
 Out of respect for Menelaus, since I was his brother.
 I wish that someone else had received this honour instead of me!
 When the army had mustered and assembled,
 We sat idle around Aulis, unable to sail.



Hermes leads the three goddesses Aphrodite, Athene and Hera to Paris for his judgement (Attic vase, Berlin).

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[More information](#)**Calchas' prophecy**

The Greek army, assembled at Aulis, is unable to sail because there is no wind (10, 332). As the Greeks believed that natural phenomena were controlled by the gods, Calchas (90), their principal seer, was asked to interpret the lack of wind. He pronounced the need for a sacrifice to Artemis. The reason given for this varies. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Artemis, protector of life, demands that, before the fleet can sail, the Greek commander should make a sacrifice in advance for all the suffering the Greeks will cause in Troy. Elsewhere (e.g. Sophocles' *Electra*) Agamemnon must make amends for killing a stag sacred to Artemis and boasting of it. Here Euripides is not interested in the reason for Artemis' demand. Calchas simply states (93) that a sacrifice will make the expedition possible; there is no suggestion (94) that failure to sacrifice will anger Artemis. The Greeks have a choice and it can be decided on human terms, by the conflicting claims of family and duty. The Greek text does not make clear to whom Calchas announced the prophecy (see 'Secrecy and lies', p. 12, 493n, 504).

Agamemnon's children

Agamemnon was the father of Clytaemnestra's four children: Iphigeneia, Chrysothemis, Electra and Orestes. Only Iphigeneia and the baby Orestes appear in this play.

92 Artemis Goddess of wildlife, hunting and child-birth. Her virgin status means that she also protects the innocent, such as the unborn child. Artemis had a sanctuary at Brauron, 17 km from Athens, and there was also a temple to Artemis at Aulis, a popular tourist attraction. The fact that she demands a human sacrifice to allow the fleet to sail is unusual, but it is a traditional feature of the story; goats or deer were the usual sacrificial animals for Artemis.

Human sacrifice

Although there is archaeological evidence that the Minoan and Mycenaean Greeks (1800–1100 BC) performed human sacrifices in times of great peril, the Greeks of the fifth century BC encountered stories of human sacrifice only in tragedy.

95 Talthybius Agamemnon's herald. It was the job of a herald to issue formal proclamations, keep order at meetings and carry messages.

101 Achilles Achilles, king of Phthia in Thessaly (see map, p. vii), joined the expedition with 50 ships and his contingent of Myrmidons (222, *Iliad* 2). For his upbringing see *Background to the story*, p. v.