

Iphigenia in Aulis
by C.M. Vester

Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* is a stunning play, filled with inventive and emotional reversal. In a nutshell, its plot is as follows: the Greek troops are stuck in Aulis on the east coast of Greece, awaiting the winds that will carry their military expedition to Troy. Calchas, the prophet of the Greeks, has declared that Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis. In return for this offering, a thousand Greek ships will set sail. There will be a great war between the Trojans and Greeks, with the latter utterly destroying the eastern kingdom. Agamemnon wavers, first declaring that he will never kill his own daughter. When confronted by his brother, who raises charges of cowardice, lack of leadership, and the loss of glory and booty, Agamemnon changes his mind and sends for his daughter. Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, is told that she is to send their daughter to be married to Achilles, the foremost warrior of the Greeks. Their daughter ultimately chooses to be sacrificed, having decided that her life is less valuable than the promised glory of the Greek army.

A significant part of the play's meaning is derived from watching a young woman prove herself to be braver and more dedicated to Greek ideals than her father, the foremost leader of thousands of Greek troops. And one of the most striking ways the text drives us to respect and pity Iphigenia is by merging the ritual of sacrifice with that of marriage. *The* career of choice for a young Greek woman was that of wife and mother, and the wedding launching this occupation was well defined, marked by specific procedures, rituals, and expectations. Marriage was first contracted by the woman's guardian with the bridegroom or his parents, an agreement that was sealed by a handshake between the men (Oakley & Sinos, 9). The father or guardian would state that he was handing over the young woman for the production of children, a statement phrased using agricultural language. As New Comedy recounts, the formula for this was much like the following: "I give this girl to you for the cultivation of legitimate children" (Menander, *Perikeiromene*, 1013-14). The young woman's guardian would then promise a dowry, and the young woman was engaged to be married. A wedding was normally stretched out over three days, with the first for preparations, the second for feasting, and the third for transferring the bride to her husband's house (Oakley & Sinos, 10). And here it must be stressed, every important event in Greek cultural life included sacrifices, and the wedding proved no exception.

Prior to the wedding day, a bride stayed with her mother and female relatives for her final days as part of that household. During this time, she made various offerings to different gods. Toys, childhood clothing, a lock of hair, incense, or animals might be offered to Artemis, Aphrodite, Hera, and/or other goddesses. The actual wedding day began with a ritual bath to purify and increase fertility. The bride was then dressed, with a veil put on only to be removed after she was handed over to her husband. The bath and dressing were accompanied by sacrifices, and then the bride's mother and other women would accompany her to the feasting hall. At the end of the feast the bride was unveiled by her husband, and the couple made the procession to his (and her) home. The groom took his wife by her wrist, and thus took her away from her family. Torches and music accompanied the couple to their new home. When they came to the house the groom lifted his bride from the chariot, and the mother-in-law welcomed the new wife to the house. The

bride was introduced to the hearth (the centre of the home), and then showered with nuts, figs, and other dried fruit such as dates, acts that marked out the bride's fertility and new role as wife and future mother. Ritual singing was undertaken as the couple entered and remained in their bedchamber, and greeted the couple as they came out in the morning.

Iphigenia in Aulis possesses many of these wedding rituals and procedures. Much space is dedicated to describing Iphigenia's arrival, preparation, and her sacrifice. She is first told that her father has found her a husband, and that she is to prepare for this union. As is right for ancient Greek wedding ritual, Iphigenia comes to Aulis accompanied by her mother and brother. As is common, there is a dowry, here brought by her mother from the household of Agamemnon (lines 612-13). Iphigenia is told that she must prepare for her new life, and that she will be quite alone, far from her parents and home (666, 669). Consistently, elements of wedding rituals are mentioned. Marriage hymns are recalled (435-38, 694), as are sacrifices of grain (435, 1111, 1470), offerings for Artemis (718-19, 1113), wedding song and dancing (437-8), the mother's role in preparing and giving her daughter away (458, 609-12, 736, 740-1). The father's role in finding a bridegroom and arranging the union is frequently referred to (711, 885, 898, 1356), as is the wedding feast (720-21), the ritual bathing of the bride (1477) and the wedding torches (732).

Yet it is not a wedding between man and woman, a union that will be fertile in making the household grow in children and wealth. This is a union between the god of death, Hades, and a mortal woman (461), a union that will reap the destruction of thousands of Trojans. As is common in Greek wedding ritual, Clytemnestra weeps when separated from her daughter, and cannot hope for the comfort and reward of future grandchildren. Instead, Iphigenia's sacrifice, or marriage, will bring glory to the Greeks. They will bring down a civilization, and utterly destroy it, and this is in a way foretold by the perverted ritual of commingled marriage and sacrifice. This becomes clear in the final song of the chorus, for in describing the end of Iphigenia, wedding ritual is pervasive, as are the goals and procedures of sacrifice.

O look at the girl who walks
To the goddess' altar
That Troy may be brought low
And the Phrygian die.
Behold, she walks
With her hair in garlands of honour,
And flung upon her body the lustral waters.
To the altar she goes
Of the goddess of bloody mind
Where she shall drip
With streams of flowing blood
And die,
Her body's lovely neck
Slashed with a sword to death.
Oh, the waters await you,
The waters of purification,
Your father will pour them.

And the army too awaits you,
The mighty host of the Greeks
Awaits eagerly your death,
For their sailing to Troy. (1510-20)

Select Bibliography:

Oakley, J.H. and Sinos, R.H. 1993. *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Rehm, R. 1994. *Marriage to Death: the Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Greene, D. and Lattimore, R. (eds) 1958. *Euripides IV: Rhesus, Suppliant Women, Orestes, Iphigenia in Aulis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.