Iphigenia at Aulis

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EURIPIDES

Euripides was Greek tragedian whose work, along with that of his predecessors Sophocles and Aeschylus, is widely regarded today as some of the most important art of the Classical Era. Only vague outlines of Euripides's biography are known today, and many stories of his life are widely considered to be birthed from folklore: it is possible that he was born to a mother and father who believed, thanks to the word of an oracle, that their son was destined for athletic greatness and wasted no time enrolling him in an athletic education. In Euripides's adult life, he seems to have been married twice—both marriages failed, and Euripides, according to legend, retreated into a cave on his home island of Salamis to read and write. Euripides first competed in the City Dionysia, an Athenian drama festival, in 455 B.C.E.—he won prizes for his work, two of which were delivered posthumously. Euripides's dramas, which include *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *The Trojan Women*, and *The Bacchae*, are notable for their focus on the internality of their characters—an important new development in the presentational tradition of Greek drama. Famed playwrights of later centuries such as Racine, Shakespeare, and Ibsen cited Euripides's investment in emotion and psychology as enormous influences on their own work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While not exactly a historical event, but rather a mythological one, the beginning of the Trojan War forms the framework for the events of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. Euripides's audiences would have been intimately familiar with the mythology surrounding the onset of the war, and so the play is notably devoid of too much exposition. Nevertheless, the preceding events in the mythological record are important to understanding each character's motivations. Helen, widely mythologized as the most beautiful woman in the world, was the daughter of Leda, wife of the Spartan king Tyndareus—though Helen's father was the god Zeus, who came to Leda disguised as a swan and impregnated her. Helen was the sister of Clytemnestra, and both sisters were married to the sons of Atreus—Menelaos and Agamemnon, respectively. Menelaos became king of Sparta while Agamemnon ruled his homeland of Mycenae. When Paris, a young prince of Troy, was appointed by Zeus to judge whether Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite was the most beautiful goddess, Aphrodite rigged the competition by promising Paris the love of the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen. Paris traveled to Sparta claiming to be a diplomat and seized the opportunity to abscond with Helen—in some retellings of the myth Helen resists him, but in others she willingly elopes to Troy. The outraged and humiliated Menelaos then rallied the Grecian army together with his brother Agamemnon and led the troops to Aulis. On the way, Agamemnon killed a deer—perhaps for sustenance for his troops—and incurred the wrath of the goddess Artemis, who punished the king by stalling the winds at the port of Aulis. The prophet Kalchas told Agamemnon that the only way to appease the goddess, reanimate the winds, and move onward to Troy was to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to Artemis at the temple in Aulis. Agamemnon summoned her, falsely claiming the warrior Achilles wanted to marry her. As the play begins, audiences find Agamemnon encamped at Aulis and wrestling with the dubious morality of his past and future decisions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Iphigeneia at Aulis is the last of Euripides's extant plays and it draws major inspiration from the written and oral traditions of Ancient Greek mythology popular in the collective cultural consciousness of Euripides's day. The conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles over Iphigeneia's fate echoes a disagreement they have over the fate of a prisoner of war—Chryseis, the daughter of a Trojan priest—early on in Homer's *Iliad*. The Trojan War itself is one of the major events of Greek mythology, and Euripides's choice to compose a play about a lesser-known event directly preceding the war reflects his fascination with the play's anti-war themes of humility and grace. *Iphigeneia at Aulis* has also inspired a large number of adaptations and retellings across a wide swath of mediums including plays, operas, novels, and films. Some of the most famous adaptations of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* include Jean Racine's 1674 tragedy *Iphigénie*, Christoph Willibald Gluck's 1774 opera *Iphigénie en Aulide*, Barry Unsworth's 2003 novel *The Songs of the Kings*, and Charles L. Mee's 2007 play *Iphigeneia 2.0*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Iphigeneia at Aulis (in Greek, Iphigeneia en Aulidi)
- **When Written:** c. 408 B.C.E.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greek
- **Genre:** Greek Tragedy
- **Setting:** Aulis, Ancient Greece
- **Climax:** A messenger visits Clytemnestra to announce that Artemis has saved Iphigeneia from being sacrificed by replacing the girl with a deer upon the sacrificial altar
- **Antagonist:** Menelaos

EXTRA CREDIT

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Modern Mythology. Greek filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos based his 2017 film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* partly on the story of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. In the film, a prophetic teenager who has recently lost his father warns his late dad's wealthy and powerful doctor—who failed to save the man during an important surgery—that if the doctor does not choose one member of his own family to die by a certain date, they will all perish. The magical-realist film explores the fallout of being met with such an ultimatum and, in the end, the doctor does indeed make the impossible choice of selecting to kill one of his own children rather than doom his entire family. The doctor, played by Colin Farrell, can be seen as an allegorical stand-in for Agamemnon, while his family can be seen as a stand-in for all of Greece. In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, Agamemnon is tortured by the idea that if he does not kill his child, his country will suffer and burn—such terrible, dramatic questions and dilemmas are clearly just as relevant to the artists of the modern era as they were to the writers and philosophers of antiquity.

PLOT SUMMARY

At an army encampment in the port city of Aulis, Greece, Agamemnon—the king of Mycenae and the leader of the Greek expedition against Troy—paces nervously outside his tent in the hours before dawn. The winds in Aulis have ceased, so the army's ships are stalled in the harbor. Agamemnon calls for his attendant, an old man who is the longtime servant of Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra (who is home in Mycenae with their many children). The old man notices Agamemnon's agitated demeanor and asks what's wrong. Agamemnon reveals that he's learned some terrible information: the only way to get the winds moving again, according to the prophet Kalchas, is for Agamemnon to sacrifice his eldest daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis. The sacrifice will be retribution for Agamemnon angering Artemis by killing a **deer**, an animal sacred to the goddess, on his way to the port. Upon learning the goddess's demands, Agamemnon begged his brother Menelaos—who has called up the armies to sail on Troy in order to reclaim his wife, Helen, from her elopement with the Trojan prince Paris—to call off the troops, but Menelaos refused. Agamemnon sent a letter home to Mycenae calling Iphigeneia to Aulis under false pretenses: he told her she is to be married to the great warrior Achilles. Agamemnon, however, wants to make things right and prevent Iphigeneia from meeting a terrible fate. He asks the old man to hurry off and deliver a new letter to Mycenae which begs Iphigeneia to stay away from Aulis at all costs. The old man, though appalled by the king's actions, agrees to deliver the letter and hurries away. Agamemnon, exhausted, retreats into his tent. A chorus of young Chalkidian women comes forward to comment upon the action. The women praise the might of the Greek army, the handsomeness of its soldiers, and the swiftness of its ships as they pray for a successful campaign against Troy.

Menelaos enters, dragging the old man with him—he has intercepted the old man on his way to deliver Agamemnon's letter. Agamemnon comes out of his tent and Menelaos accuses him of trying to betray the Greek cause—he reminds Agamemnon that he was keen to lead the armies for Troy until he received word that he'd have to sacrifice something of his own to get them there. Agamemnon in turn accuses Menelaos of putting his own family—and all of Greece—in jeopardy all for the sake of retrieving his unvirtuous wife. As the men argue back and forth, a messenger arrives to tell Agamemnon that Clytemnestra has arrived with their infant son Orestes and Iphigeneia in tow. Agamemnon solemnly laments to Menelaos that he has "fallen into the snare of fate" and that he has no idea of what to do. Menelaos, overcome with empathy, tells Agamemnon that he has been right all along—Iphigeneia must be spared. Agamemnon thanks Menelaos for his change of heart but he admits that he fears it's too late—if the men realize that Agamemnon has betrayed their cause, they will turn on him and kill him, his wife, and his children anyway. Menelaos somberly departs. The chorus laments the terrible decision Agamemnon must make.

As a chorus of attendants helps Clytemnestra, Iphigeneia, and Orestes from their chariot, Clytemnestra fawns over her children and expresses her excitement for Iphigeneia's wedding day. Iphigeneia is bursting with excitement to see Agamemnon, whom she loves dearly. As Agamemnon steps out of his tent to greet his family, however, Iphigeneia notes his distracted demeanor. Agamemnon blames his mood on the impending war but he can barely hold himself together in the face of his favorite daughter. He begins crying about how much he'll miss Iphigeneia, who assumes he is referring to her impending marriage. She comforts him blithely, then heads inside the tent. Clytemnestra, too, tries to comfort her husband by assuring him she feels the same parental grief over sending their eldest child off to be married. As Clytemnestra excitedly asks about wedding preparations, Agamemnon tries to tell her that she should let him handle the ceremony and return home with Orestes. Clytemnestra refuses. Miffed, she heads into the tent. Alone again, Agamemnon laments his position, then goes off to meet with Kalchas to make final preparations for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

Achilles enters, demanding to see Agamemnon—he and his troops are frustrated by the long wait in Aulis and the silence from their leadership. Clytemnestra exits the tent and exuberantly introduces herself to Achilles, excitedly telling him that their families are soon to be joined through marriage. Achilles, who has no idea that his name has been used as part of Agamemnon's plot to draw Iphigeneia to Aulis, is not just confused but actively disgusted. Clytemnestra, humiliated, apologizes. The old man, having overheard their conversation, comes out from the tent and explains everything to both of

them, revealing Agamemnon's plans for Iphigeneia's sacrifice and his deception of both Achilles and Clytemnestra as a means to that dreadful end. As Clytemnestra receives the news of Agamemnon's plan, she falls to her knees and begs Achilles to save her and her daughter. Achilles agrees to help Clytemnestra. He promises that he will not let Iphigeneia come to harm—he will defend her until his last breath as if she truly were his bride. He suggests the innocent girl be kept ignorant about the terrible fate her father has planned for her. In the meantime, Achilles suggests, Clytemnestra should go to Agamemnon and attempt to reason with him herself. Achilles promises that if she fails to move Agamemnon's heart, he will then intervene on her behalf. While Clytemnestra goes back inside to wait for Agamemnon's return, the chorus of Chalkidian women laments that the men in charge of leading the Greek armies to Troy have "put justice behind them."

After the chorus's lament is finished, Clytemnestra emerges from the tent to declare that Agamemnon is nowhere to be found. Frustrated, Clytemnestra has told Iphigeneia of her father's plans. Agamemnon enters and asks for Iphigeneia to be brought forth to be married—he is still keeping up with his ruse. Clytemnestra decides to play along and calls Iphigeneia out from the tent. Iphigeneia, with Orestes in her arms, emerges from the tent shielding her face. Once Iphigeneia is present, Clytemnestra demands Agamemnon tell the truth. When he plays dumb she rails against him, reminding him of all the loyalty she's shown him over the years. She threatens to turn against him forever if he hurts Iphigeneia. The chorus urges Agamemnon to heed his wife. Iphigeneia steps forward and begs her father to spare her—she is innocent, she says, and she has nothing to do with the strife Helen and Paris have wrought. Agamemnon, however, laments that he has no choice in the matter—the Trojan war is the will of the gods themselves, and if he is the one to prevent it from happening he'll surely incur even more of their wrath. Agamemnon solemnly walks away. Iphigeneia curses her father, her country, and her fate. Achilles enters; behind him, the angry screams of a mob of men can be heard. Achilles warns Iphigeneia that more and more men are calling for her sacrifice—they are increasingly impatient to get sailing. Achilles vows to protect Iphigeneia against every last one of them, even if his own troops should turn against him. Iphigeneia, however, steps forward and declares that there's no use in fighting or "hold[ing] out against the inevitable." She has decided to sacrifice herself in hopes that her name and her country will both come to glory. Achilles begs Iphigeneia to flee Aulis with him and come home to be his bride, but Iphigeneia's mind is made up—she is ready to die so that Greece can be free. She begs her mother not to cry or to be angry with Agamemnon. After bidding her mother and younger brother goodbye, Iphigeneia sings a plaintive yet joyous lament to the goddess Artemis, hoping that her blood will appease the goddess and bring success to the Grecian campaign. Iphigeneia walks away toward the sacrificial altar, where her father and Achilles are waiting for her. Clytemnestra takes Orestes back into the tent.

Sometime later, a messenger arrives with joyous news: a miracle has occurred at the altar. Clytemnestra exits her tent to hear the messenger's tale. The messenger reports that as the prophet Kalchas prepared to bring the knife down on Iphigeneia's throat, the girl transformed into a deer, signaling Artemis's satisfaction with the sacrifice. Iphigeneia has been spared, the messenger reports, and brought up to heaven to live among the gods and goddesses. The winds have picked up, and the men are about to sail for Greece; all is well. Agamemnon approaches and bids Clytemnestra goodbye. He begs her not to be angry with him. She does not respond but instead she turns quietly and enters the tent as Agamemnon triumphantly leads his men down to the harbor where their ships await them.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Agamemnon – The king of Mycenae, the brother of Menelaos, and the leader of the Greek expedition against Troy. Agamemnon is the play's protagonist and its complicated moral center. As leader of the Greek armies, his central dilemma is whether or not to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis so that the winds might change and allow the armies to sail onward to Troy. This quandary is tied in with Agamemnon's ideas of pride, glory, family, duty, and gender roles. As the audience watches Agamemnon wrestle with the moral and practical outcomes of whatever choice he makes, the many factors weighing on him become clear. Agamemnon feels loyalty to his brother Menelaos, whose pride has been hurt because his wife, Helen, has absconded across the sea with the younger, more handsome Trojan prince Paris. Agamemnon's loyalty to Menelaos is compounded by the brothers' shared sense of duty to their house and their lineage—a responsibility which both feel is more important than their duties to the living, breathing members of their immediate families. Agamemnon understands his brother's wounded masculinity at having lost his wife to another man—but he wrestles with whether killing his own child will affect his own identity as a man and a father. Agamemnon believes himself to be a victim of fate and destiny, and like many of the characters in the play, he fails to understand that this very belief (and his refusal to take decisive action in the face of it) is what actually does seal his fate. Agamemnon is a victim of his own pride, hubris, and indecision—ultimately, Iphigeneia is spared but she ascends to heaven where she is parted from her family forever. Agamemnon's actions throughout the play will have reverberations throughout his family and indeed throughout all of Greece in the years to come—but Agamemnon's tragic fate is that he is unable to foresee these consequences of his actions

(or of his inaction).

Iphigeneia – Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's daughter and the central figure of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. Iphigeneia is summoned to the port of Aulis by her father under false pretenses—she is told that she's being brought to camp to marry the young, handsome, and noble warrior Achilles, but in reality, Achilles knows nothing of the "marriage." Agamemnon has brought Iphigeneia to Aulis at the behest of his brother Menelaos and the prophet Kalchas, who has determined that the only way to reanimate the port's becalmed winds (which the goddess Artemis has stalled) is to sacrifice Iphigeneia to Artemis. When Iphigeneia arrives in Aulis, she is happy and excited—but when she realizes the truth behind her summoning, she is understandably devastated and frightened. Iphigeneia spends much of the play begging her father to spare her life, strategizing with the confused and angered Achilles as to how they might retaliate against Agamemnon, and commiserating with her mother about the great injustice that has been done to them. Eventually, Iphigeneia has a sudden and bizarre change of heart: she decides to sacrifice herself willingly rather than "hold out against the inevitable" any longer. Iphigeneia declares that as a sacrifice, she will bring glory to Greece and save the lives of "thousands" of Greek men. She refuses Achilles's help and her mother's protestations and marches herself up to the altar—where she is, at the last minute, spared by the goddess Artemis and brought up to heaven, her body replaced with that of a sacrificial **deer**. Iphigeneia's arc is a confusing one, likely meant to highlight the folly of the pursuit of pride and glory through war and sacrifice. As a woman in a man's world, Iphigeneia knows that resisting an angry mob of soldiers is futile and so she decides to embody the role of the good, noble, sacrificial virgin rather than resist what she believes fate has decided for her. Iphigeneia's selfless actions mean that she is ultimately rewarded and brought up to heaven to live in peace and safety—but though she achieves the glory and renown she hoped to gain for herself, she is still stripped of her earthly existence and torn from her loving family.

Clytemnestra – Agamemnon's wife, queen of Mycenae, and mother to Iphigeneia and Orestes. Like several other characters in the play, such as Achilles, the Clytemnestra presented in *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is very different than the version of Clytemnestra who appears in later Greek myths. The play is in many ways Clytemnestra's origin story: watching her husband lie and betray her, willingly sacrifice their eldest daughter, and prioritize the pursuit of pride and glory for Greece over the safety of their own family will eventually push Clytemnestra into rage, vengeance, and even madness. Throughout the play, however, Clytemnestra is too shocked and devastated to even be truly angry about having been led to Aulis under false pretenses; her focus, as a mother, is on saving Iphigeneia's life rather than exacting revenge on Agamemnon. A devoted parent who puts her children's wellbeing above her own at all times—unlike her selfish, prideful husband—Clytemnestra has no drive toward the pride and stoicism her husband and his brother Menelaos claim to value. She is willing to prostrate herself before the great warrior Achilles, to beg for the help of the old man who has been her slave for years, and to tempt the rage of the gods, the Grecian armies, and the legions of men at her husband's command rather than give up what is "most dear" to her: her daughter. In the end, Clytemnestra's pleas for sanity and nonviolence are drowned out even by Iphigeneia, who willingly marches to her death at the altar in hopes that her sacrifice will allow Greece to win the Trojan War. Clytemnestra is devastated by her daughter's choice—and even when a messenger reports that Iphigeneia has been spared by Artemis and brought up to heaven, Clytemnestra remains stoic, quiet, and simmering with a rage that foreshadows the bloody revenge she'll exact later on in her own personal narrative.

Menelaos – Agamemnon's brother and the king of Sparta. Menelaos's wife, Helen, has recently absconded to Troy with the young Trojan prince Paris. Menelaos is a jealous and prideful man obsessed with maintaining his own personal reputation. He sees his own personal honor as synonymous with the honor of his house, his lineage, and Greece as a whole—a stance which Euripides seems to decry as one that's foolish and full of hubris. Menelaos is desperate to get his wife back from a land he sees as being ruled by "barbarians" and he will stop at nothing to get what he wants—he even wants to sacrifice his niece Iphigeneia in exchange for the blessing of the winds that will allow the Greeks to reach Troy. Eventually, after hearing Agamemnon's impassioned lament about being trapped in the "snare of fate," Menelaos begins to soften and see the error of his ways. He tells Agamemnon that he doesn't want to ruin their relationship—he can find a new wife but he could never get a new brother should he lose the love of the one he has. But it is too late, and Agamemnon already feels paralyzed by the fear of what will happen among the gathered armies if he doesn't sacrifice his daughter for the sake of Menelaos's cause. Menelaos is, in this way, a tragic figure in spite of all his flaws: he realizes too late the folly of his ways and the impact of his words and demands, only to find that he has entangled his entire country in the pursuit of his own personal vendetta.

Achilles – A "hero-to-be of the Trojan War," Achilles is a young man of immense strength and beauty. Though Achilles is a major figure in Greek myth and is the central character of Homer's *Iliad*, in the context of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* Achilles is a relatively inexperienced young warrior who hasn't yet come into his own. The son of the beautiful water nymph Thetis and the powerful king Peleus, Achilles was dipped in the River Styx as a child and granted virtual invincibility. The only part of his body that is not protected by the river's power is his heel. Achilles is presented as a noble youth with a strong moral

center who is disgusted when he learns that Agamemnon has brought Iphigeneia to Aulis to be sacrificed under false pretenses: Agamemnon lies to Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra that he's arranged a marriage between Iphigeneia and Achilles. Achilles, however, represents the play's calm moral center as he chooses not to overreact to the humiliation. He is a foil to Menelaos, who *has* overreacted to his own dishonor by rallying all of Greece's armies to sail on Troy in pursuit of his wife, Helen. Instead, Achilles calmly tries to find a solution to the mess Agamemnon has created. Achilles nobly declares his intent to protect Iphigeneia from her father up until his very last breath, defending her as if she truly were his bride—but Iphigeneia eventually decides that she actually wants to offer herself up as a sacrifice so that Greece might come to glory in the war. Achilles begs Iphigeneia—with whom he has become infatuated—to come to her senses and fight for her life, but when she remains firm in her resolve, Achilles admits he admires her dedication to her country. Nonetheless, he offers to accompany her up to the sacrificial altar and he lets her know that if she changes her mind, he will defend her even at the moment the knife is brought to her throat. Gentle, kind, and levelheaded, the Achilles of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* offers an alternative view of the proud, fierce warrior represented in other stories of the Trojan War.

Chorus of Chalkidian Women – A chorus of women who claim to have come to Aulis all the way from Chalkis simply to glimpse the might of the Grecian army as the men prepare to sail for Troy. In Greek drama, the chorus is an important part of any play: they provide commentary on and interpretation of the action onstage and they often serve as the moral center of the play. The chorus also provides important context as to the histories, myths, and family lineages that are at work in any play. In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, the chorus of Chalkidian women is a curious and enthusiastic group which seems just as invested in the emotional stakes of the action as the major characters are.

The Old Man – One of Clytemnestra's slaves who has been in her employ since her wedding to Agamemnon. The old man has accompanied Agamemnon to Aulis to serve as his attendant. Though put-upon and condemned to a life of hardship, the old man is wise, gentle, kind, and empathetic. He takes care to advise Agamemnon in a delicate moment as the king agonizes over whether to summon his daughter Iphigeneia to Aulis so that she can be sacrificed to Artemis, as the prophet Kalchas has said is necessary if they're ever to sail from Aulis. Agamemnon charges the old man with delivering an important letter to Clytemnestra back at home in Mycenae that will save Iphigeneia's life, but the old man's journey is intercepted by Menelaos, who wants the sacrifice to go ahead as planned.

Helen – Menelaos's wife and the queen of Sparta. Helen has absconded to Troy with her lover Paris, a young Trojan prince. This leads the humiliated Menelaos to gather up the armies of Greece together with his brother Agamemnon and sail on Troy to exact vengeance. In Greek mythology, Helen, the sister of Clytemnestra and the daughter of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Leda, is widely regarded as the most beautiful woman who has ever lived. Helen is never seen onstage.

Artemis – A daughter of Zeus, Artemis is the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon and is protectress of virgins. Artemis stalls the winds at the port of Aulis to prevent the Greek army from sailing on Troy after Agamemnon offends her by killing a **deer**, Artemis's favorite animal. The prophet Kalchas declares that the only way to appease the goddess and summon the winds again is for Agamemnon to offer his daughter Iphigeneia as a sacrifice. At the end of the play, after much agonizing, Iphigeneia at last decides to nobly submit herself as a sacrifice. Artemis is so moved by the girl's goodness and nobility that she chooses to replace the girl with one of her own deer at the last moment and kill the animal instead, while delivering Iphigeneia up to the safety of heaven in exchange for her selflessness. Though never seen onstage, Artemis's presence is felt throughout the play.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Paris – A handsome young Trojan prince who has stolen Helen away from Menelaos and brought her to Troy to be his queen. Though never seen onstage, Paris's actions motivate the entirety of the long and bloody Trojan War.

Kalchas – A prophet and priest who has declared that Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to Artemis in order to lift the calm that has settled over the winds and which prevents the Greek armies from sailing across the sea to Troy.

Orestes – Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's infant son and Iphigeneia's brother.

Chorus of Attendants – A chorus made up of Clytemnestra's servants and attendants.

A Messenger – A messenger who comes to deliver the news that the goddess Artemis has spared Iphigeneia's life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WAR, SACRIFICE, PRIDE, AND GLORY

At the center of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is the impending Trojan War—a bloody conflict in which Greece will sail on Troy to steal back Helen (the wife of Menelaos, king of Sparta), who has absconded across the sea

with a handsome young Trojan prince named Paris. The war itself is one fought on the basis of pride: the Greeks see it as their moral duty to restore glory to their humiliated king Menelaos, and the only way they can get across the sea is by sacrificing Menelaos's brother Agamemnon's daughter Iphigeneia. Throughout the play, Euripides engages the idea of war and human sacrifice as two activities in which bloody terror and resounding loss are the only routes to pride and glory. Ultimately, Euripides exposes the folly of both war and sacrifice, suggesting that a vicious and never-ending cycle of violence will never produce the desired ends of true glory and grandeur.

Iphigeneia at Aulis is near-revolutionary in its anti-war stance. Throughout the play, Euripides demonstrates how wars fought due to wounded pride or in pursuit of far-off glory are not just foolish but cruel—and how they often lead to a damaging, distracting vortex of chaos which, ironically, makes the attainment of pride and glory all the more unlikely. One of the major ways in which Euripides broadcasts his contempt for wars fought in pursuit of pride and glory is through Achilles. A famous figure of Greek myth known for his skill as a warrior, Achilles—a descendant of Zeus destined to soon to be a hero of the Trojan War—laments that a "frenzy has seized Greece for this war" early on in the play. He knows that the gods themselves have condoned the war and they have urged Greece to retaliate against the Trojans—but Achilles seems to believe that the war itself is a "waste," fought to restore the pride of one man: Menelaos. In popular imagination, Achilles is often associated with pride and hubris—he is a man made invincible by the gods but he is cursed with one weak spot on the back of his heel. Achilles's presence in myth or popular culture therefore often signals ignorance and the prideful pursuit of glory. In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, however, Achilles is a morally astute, level-headed young man who tries to teach others to "curb [their] grief in adversity," to live by "reason" instead of anger, and to not let "pride [...] draw [them] on." Euripides cannily uses the figure of Achilles to demonstrate that warmongering in the name of pride and glory does not befit any real soldier—Achilles, the greatest hero of the Trojan War, is depicted as someone who goes into battle somewhat begrudgingly and never without weighing the costs of what a war really means. Achilles's speeches and actions throughout the play are all in this vein, and as such, they and warn against the foolish pursuit of victory in war as a means of one's personal glorification.

Euripides also shows how sacrifice is, unfortunately, regarded among the Greeks as a casualty of war—a necessary evil meant to bolster the greater good. Prophet Kalchas declares that Agamemnon must sacrifice Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis in order to move the winds which will enable the Greeks to sail to Troy. Agamemnon's resultant internal conflict—and Iphigeneia's martyrlike wish to glorify Greece by giving up her own life—mirror Euripides's indictment of sacrifice as a means of attaining glory. "We'll buy back our own harm / with what is most dear to us," Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, warns her husband when she learns of his plan to sacrifice their eldest daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis. She implores her husband to understand that killing Iphigeneia in order to enable the fighting of a war based on restoring Menelaos's wounded pride will harm their family irrevocably—they will "buy" no glory with Iphigeneia's life, only pain. Clytemnestra is one of the few characters to see sacrifice as a crime that should be avoided rather than a necessary evil that is a part of life. She sees no glory in the act of sacrifice or in the role of being the mother to a sacrificial figure—she knows there is only "harm" in selling off what is "most dear" in hopes of appeasing the gods or the prophets. Euripides also uses Iphigeneia's own eventual resignation to her role as a sacrifice to indict the idea of sacrifice as a means to pride and glory. "I have made up my mind to die. I want to come to it / with glory," says Iphigeneia as she declares that she will no longer struggle to be spared from the sacrificial altar. Instead, she'll willingly give her life so that the people of Greece can defeat the Trojan army and restore pride to their nation. Up to this point, Iphigeneia has begged ferociously for her father to change his mind and spare her life—but now, she essentially gives up and resigns herself to being sacrificed for the greater good. Her words reflect the same thoughtless striving toward an invisible, ineffable "glory" which is embodied by the very soldiers calling for Iphigeneia's blood so that they might sail on Troy to bring pride back to their country's name.

Euripides uses the mechanism of tragedy to show how often vain attempts to secure pride and glory through bloody, cruel means such as war and sacrifice end instead in pain and chaos. Euripides deconstructs the cultural and religious myths of ancient Greece in order to provide a commentary on the cruelty of a society which seeks above all to bestow glory upon its own name—at any cost, no matter how terrible.

FATE VS. ACTION

At the ideological core of *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is the tension between fate and action or choice. Throughout the play, king of Mycenae Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra, and their daughter Iphigeneia see themselves repeatedly as victims of fate, or pawns of their own destinies—and ultimately use the whims of fate and destiny as excuses for eschewing any meaningful action-taking or decision-making in the face of disaster and calamity. Though Euripides highlights several major moments where a decisive choice or canny action could change the course of events, his characters are unable to see themselves as individuals with any real sense of agency. Ultimately, Euripides uses tragic irony to argue that the inability to see oneself as capable of changing one's fate is, in fact, what seals one's fate. In other words,

people are only victims of their own destinies if they envision themselves that way in the first place.

"Oh destiny, / spare those I pray for!" cries one of Clytemnestra's servants at a crucial point in the play. Throughout the play, Euripides shows how all of his characters, major and minor, believe themselves to be at the mercy of the unseen forces of destiny and fate. Those who might otherwise have had a chance to affect real change in their own lives or in the lives of others miss those chances by believing themselves to be pawns of fate and destiny. In this way, they perpetuate a self-fulfilling prophecy of their lives, surrendering to fate because they believe there is no other option and then professing their belief that fate has been the force guiding them all along. Early on in the play, Agamemnon declares in a self-pitying soliloquy that he has "fallen into the snare of fate" and has been "outwitted / from the start by the cunning of destiny." Agamemnon's also declares himself a "slave of the mob [of commoners he] lead[s]" and a victim of "Priam's son Paris" who has flung Greece into chaos "by winning the love of Helen." Agamemnon is a mighty and noble king—but from almost the outset of the play, Euripides characterizes him as a man who, for all his pomp and power, sees himself as a victim of almost everything around him: his fate, his own station, and his political enemies. This establishes that even the most powerful people in Greece conceive of themselves as both hapless and hopeless in the face of forces beyond their control, such as fate and destiny, and would rather blame the whims of the divine for their problems than take any real action to change their circumstances. Euripides seems to have both deep contempt and a twisted kind of empathy for Agamemnon: his tragic flaw is that he can see no other option but to surrender to the "cunning of destiny," and yet this tragic flaw is also presented as laughable.

Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigeneia, also sees herself as a victim of fate and destiny. She arrives in Aulis under false pretenses, having been summoned to camp by a letter from her father which declares that she is to marry the hero Achilles. Iphigeneia willfully submits to the arranged marriage—but when she realizes it is nothing but a ruse meant to draw her to camp so that she can be sacrificed for the Grecian cause, she finds herself facing a crisis of fate and faith. At first, she struggles against the idea that she is doomed to be a human sacrifice, begging her father to spare her life—but after Agamemnon tells her that he himself is compelled by "stronger hands than [his] own" to take her life, she softens and begins to go along with what she believes the fates have decreed for her. "It is hard to hold out against the inevitable," Iphigeneia says as she announces that she'll willingly offer herself as a sacrifice to Artemis and die for the Grecian people. Iphigeneia's motivation for accepting what she believes to be the "inevitable"—her fate as a sacrifice—stems from a desire to appease the gods and not further anger them by resisting the pull of destiny. "Lead me to the altar / if this is what destiny has decreed," she declares, ignoring the idea that perhaps it is not the idea of destiny to which she is beholden but instead her own will. The roles of fate and destiny in the classical world are, of course, impossible to dispute: prophets and oracles were figures believed to have a direct connection to the gods, and the play's action is indeed set in motion because the prophet Kalchas declares Iphigeneia must be sacrificed. Euripides and his contemporaries no doubt wrestled with the veracity of prophecies and visions and questioned whether will could ever trump destiny. But *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, with its almost unbelievably solemn march toward an ending which no one wants, seems to be a play which directly mocks the idea that humanity has no agency whatsoever and instead must submit to the wills of the fates.

Ancient Greece was a society ruled by a complex mythological hierarchy of gods, goddesses, demigods, and spirits; almost every chance happenstance or twist of fate could be seen as the will of forces larger and more powerful than humanity itself. Euripides uses *Iphigeneia at Aulis* to show how such a line of thinking, when societally reinforced, can lead to a destruction of personal agency and create the sense of one being a victim of fate or destiny, incapable of affecting change through action, choice, or deed.

FAMILY AND DUTY

Family, lineage, and inheritance are all vitally important in *Iphigeneia at Aulis*. The world of Greek myth is a small one in which gods and goddesses intermingle and breed with mortals, resulting in a sense of reverence for and duty to one's heritage—heritage which, for the characters within the play, is often divine. Euripides shows, however, that while many characters respect their lineage in word and deed, few actually respect the extant bonds within their families or feel any sense of duty to the spouses they've chosen or the children they've produced. Ultimately, Euripides argues that in the Ancient Greek world, while family and duty are hailed as vital and important parts of one's life and identity, few actually appreciate, love, or honor the families they have in the right ways—or while they have the chance.

Though it's difficult to ascertain definitive details of Euripides's biography, politics, or personal beliefs, there are clues in his writing as to the social issues and emotional problems that might have fascinated him as a man and as a writer. Throughout *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, Euripides unravels the inner conflict within Agamemnon, a man who feels a sense of commitment to his ancestral legacy and yet betrays the family he has around him. He does so in order to demonstrate how a sense of duty to one's lineage rather than one's immediate family is a foolish and destructive waste of time. Agamemnon and Menelaos—two brothers of royal rank, the king of Mycenae and the king of Sparta, respectively—are the two characters in the play whose unrelenting focus on duty to their lineage rather than to their

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actual, living family members is a source of strife, shame, and conflict. The brothers know that their power rests entirely on their house's greatness, and that knowledge dictates their interactions even with each other: for example, Menelaos swears "by Pelops, whom [their] father / called 'Father,' and by Atreus himself / who sired [them] both" to tell the truth before speaking plainly to his brother about the impending sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigeneia. Menelaos can't even open up to his own brother without invoking his duty to do so based on the integrity of their forefathers—he sees his duty as lying with the preservation of his family's legacy rather than helping the family before him. Menelaos, caring nothing for the life of his niece, begs Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigeneia in order to summon the winds that will enable the Greeks to travel to Troy to steal back Helen, Menelaos's wife who absconded with a younger, more desirable man. The layered, occasionally convoluted tiers of shirked duty and flimsy responsibility to the living form the very bedrock of both Agamemnon and Menelaos's relationships—not just with each other, but with their wives and, in Agamemnon's case, their children.

Agamemnon, like his brother Menelaos, takes his duty to restoring his family's pride and honor more seriously than he does his duty to his own living wife and children. Agamemnon does agonize over whether or not it is too big a betrayal, even for him, to sacrifice his own daughter on behalf of securing glory for kin and country—but ultimately, Euripides shows how the fact that Agamemnon would even consider sacrificing his own living child is itself an indictment of him, no matter the choice he ends up making. Iphigeneia even appeals to Agamemnon's reverence for familial lineage by begging him to spare her life "in the name / of [his grandfather] Pelops, of [his] father Atreus, of [her own] mother [Clytemnestra]". She's aware that honoring his family's legacy is of utmost importance to him and she knows that he doesn't care enough for the lives of his living, breathing family, even his children, to spare her on that reasoning alone. Even as Iphigeneia begs for her own life, there is a sense of contempt in her words as she appeals to her father's foolish preoccupation with duty to his ancestors rather than his progeny. Iphigeneia even holds her baby brother, Orestes, up to Agamemnon's face, begging him to see, in the infant boy's presence, his duty to the future of his house rather than its past.

Ultimately, Euripides uses *Iphigenia at Aulis* to argue that the ancient Greek impulse to revere one's lineage or parentage while effectively ignoring the duty one has to one's living, breathing family is one which creates sadness, discord, anger, and even the impulse for revenge. By demonstrating Agamemnon's willingness to betray his own child for the sake of his line's glory, Euripides foreshadows the fall of the house of Atreus. Ultimately, he suggests that focusing too hard on securing familial glory rather than upholding familial duty will actually bring about the end of the very line one seeks to glorify.

THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF MEN

Euripides's *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is set within the encampment of the Greek army at the port of Aulis. As the men await the shift in the winds that will allow their ships to sail to Troy, they establish a tent city that's ruled and populated by men, in which women are vaguely missed but largely unwelcome. When Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, summons his daughter Iphigeneia and his wife Clytemnestra to join him there, the two women quickly realize that they're out of their depth and that they are doomed to engage in a struggle for power which has been instigated, fought, and escalated by men; Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra's roles are unjust, unfair, humiliating ones indeed. Ultimately, Euripides argues that Ancient Greece more broadly is a man's world—and that within it, women are always relegated to stereotypes: the shrew, the whore, the sacrificial lamb, the jealous and demanding goddess. The specific story of Iphigeneia, Clytemnestra, and Agamemnon becomes an allegory for the ways in which women must embody these stereotypes to survive in the world of men that was the Classical Age—and, given the work's endurance through the years, may yet still be the modern one.

As Euripides examines the unfair treatment of women within the realms of men—meaning both the specific setting of the play, the camp at Aulis, as well as the larger world of Ancient Greece—he suggests that in a man's world, women will always be seen as embodiments of unfair stereotypes. Euripides does the work of untangling those stereotypes and imbuing his female characters with complication and nuance—even as he admits that art and society generally don't do so. Clytemnestra is one of the major female roles in the play and she is a central figure in Greek drama. In Euripides's contemporary and fellow tragedian Aeschylus's cycle *The Oresteia*, Clytemnestra seeks vengeance against Agamemnon for his role in the events of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*—within this play, Euripides lays the groundwork for the transformation of a loyal wife and devoted mother into a murderous queen hell-bent on revenge. Clytemnestra is, in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, a proud mother and devoted wife who has come to love her husband in spite of the bloody roots of their marriage. Agamemnon slew Clytemnestra's first husband and the child they had together before taking her forcefully to be his own bride—in spite of all of this, Clytemnestra declares, she has been a faithful wife who has borne him many children. Euripides shows Clytemnestra embodying the stereotype of a good, loyal wife in order to survive in a world ruled by men; her husband has already shown her his might and capacity for violence, and she knows that if she is to get by, she must succumb to his will.

"If it means that one man can see the sunlight / what are the lives of thousands of women in the balance?" Iphigeneia

asks—completely unironically—as a mob of bloodthirsty men shout for her death and she at last offers herself up to be sacrificed in hopes of securing Greece's victory against the Trojans. In this moment, Iphigeneia secures her place as a stereotype of a sacrificial virgin: a guileless cipher of a woman who wants nothing for herself and is unimpeachably good to her core. Of course, Iphigeneia's "goodness" is filtered through the lens of living in a man's world: her only desire is to help speed the ships of the men seeking glory for Greece. She regards her own life as useful only insofar as it might serve the men around her—even those, such as her father, who have betrayed her. Iphigeneia's motivations are, by the end of the play, less about survival, since she knows that she must die—instead, her motivations seem to become rooted in a desire to secure glory for the very men whose bloodthirsty desire for victory has necessitated her sacrifice. Iphigeneia resigns herself to perpetuating the world of men as it is—she sees no other way for her people to prosper than by winning a war meant to declare one man's power over his wife's fate and desire.

Even powerful goddesses like Artemis and Aphrodite are reduced to stereotypes. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and Artemis, the goddess of the moon and the hunt, have certain powers—but their influence on mortals is rooted in stereotypes about the agency available to women. Aphrodite, for instance, is charged with having "crazed / the whole Greek army with a passion to sail at once / to the barbarians' own country." In other words, while the god of war Ares is regarded as a legitimate source of bloody inspiration, Aphrodite's influence on the men of Greece has left them "crazed." Artemis, the goddess who controls the winds at the port of Aulis, has purportedly—according to the prophet Kalchas—demanded the sacrifice of Iphigeneia in exchange for reanimating the stalled sea winds and allowing the Greek army to sail for Troy. Artemis is known throughout classical myth as the protectress of virgins, yet she demands the sacrifice of one in exchange for allowing a group of men to get their way. These two major goddesses are portrayed in somewhat bad faith—as more tempestuous, unfair, and meddling than their male counterparts Ares and Zeus, who are spoken of reverently throughout the drama. While all of the Greek gods were known for their human-like propensity for folly, error, rage, and jealousy, Artemis and Aphrodite are here rendered as being just as fickle, persnickety, and demanding as all women are imagined to be by the men who alternately love and tolerate them, desire and reject them.

Euripides uses *Iphigeneia at Aulis* to examine the roles available to women in a man's world—and to argue that in the male-dominated realm of the Trojan War, women existed in the male imagination only as adversaries or sacrifices, with almost no middle ground in between those two poles. By demonstrating Iphigeneia's willingness to accept the role of sacrificial lamb—and foreshadowing Clytemnestra's development as an adversary—Euripides shows how both women are forced to act as players in a game rigged against them, fighting for agency and autonomy in a world built to deny them their very humanity by slotting them into simplistic, predetermined roles.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DEER

The sacrificial deer that takes Iphigeneia's place at the end of the play represents the nobility, selflessness, and divine importance of sacrifice within Ancient Greek culture. At the end of the play, Iphigeneia stoically heads off to meet her father, Agamemnon, at the altar where she is to offer herself up as a human sacrifice to the goddess Artemis. The chorus of Chalkidian women who have been observing and commenting upon all the action in the play describe the bloody sacrifice that is soon to be made. However, after their lament is over, a messenger enters and summons Iphigeneia's mother Clytemnestra from her tent. The messenger tells Clytemnestra that a miracle has occurred up at the altar: at the moment Agamemnon was about to bring the knife down upon his daughter's throat, she vanished and was replaced by a deer—the symbol of Artemis, protectress of virgins and goddess of the hunt. The messenger declares that the good and pure Iphigeneia has been taken up to heaven to live among the gods and goddesses; Artemis sacrificed the deer herself "rather than stain her altar with [such] noble blood." The deer is the animal most beloved by and sacred to the goddess herself, who is often depicted driving a chariot led by a team of them. The sacrificial deer, then, symbolically represents the magnitude of Iphigeneia's sacrifice and the esteem it has earned her not only in the eyes of her fellow Greeks, but in those of the gods themselves.

Artemis, the very goddess who according to the prophet Kalchas demanded the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, sees how noble and selfless the girl is in giving herself up. The goddess then decides at the last minute to spare Iphigeneia and take the life of one of her favorite creatures instead, demonstrating Artemis's own willingness to sacrifice something important to her as well as emphasizing the value of Iphigeneia's decision to willingly give her life for the glory of Greece. The melodramatic ending of the play is a classic *deus ex machina*, or a plot device in which an impossible problem is quickly and neatly solved through an unlikely or unexpected occurrence, often the arrival of a god or goddess. As such, it was possibly meant to satirize or even indict the pursuit of glory through war and sacrifice. Though not mentioned within the play, it is important to note

that according to myth, the winds in Aulis have been stalled by Artemis because Agamemnon accidentally killed a deer on his way to the port. With this in mind, it is doubly meaningful that Artemis, upon seeing the goodness of the sacrificial girl Agamemnon offers up, chooses to symbolically extend an offer of peace and kill one of her own beautiful deer instead.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Iphigenia at Aulis* published in 1978.

Iphigeneia at Aulis Quotes

AGAMEMNON: I envy you, old man. I envy any man
whose life passes quietly, unnoticed by fame.
I do not envy those in authority.

OLD MAN: But it is they who have the good of life.

AGAMEMNON: You call that good? It's a trap. Great honors taste sweet
but they come bringing pain.
Something goes wrong
between a man and the gods
and his whole life is overturned.

Related Characters: The Old Man, Agamemnon (speaker), Artemis, Iphigeneia

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 19-28

Explanation and Analysis

In the first scene *of Iphigeneia at Aulis*, Agamemnon (the king of Mycenae) paces nervously in front of his command tent set up at the port of Aulis. The winds which are supposed to take the army he's leading across the sea to Troy have stalled, and Agamemnon must make a terrible decision if he wants to inspire the winds to rise again. The audience does not yet know the dilemma weighing on Agamemnon's mind, but as he calls his servant, an old man, out of the tent to ask a favor of him, a hint of what Agamemnon is wrestling with becomes clear. Throughout the play, as Agamemnon agonizes over whether to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia so that the goddess Artemis will reanimate the winds, questions of pride, fate, choice, family, and duty will plague him incessantly. In this early passage, Euripides introduces Agamemnon as a man who feels he is caught in a "trap" by his fame, by his power, by the gods' wills, and by the people all around him (like the old man) who believe him to be stronger, wiser, or more capable simply because of the station his birth has provided him. This feeling of being "trapped" will force Agamemnon to consider the role of action and choice in the face of the ideas of fate and destiny—and to decide whether he is willing to try to change what he believes is inevitable for him and his family.

THE OLD MAN: Atreus did not
sire you, Agamemnon, into a world
of pure happiness. You must expect
to suffer as well as rejoice,
since you're a man.
And the gods will see to that, whether
you like it or not.

Related Characters: The Old Man (speaker), Clytemnestra , Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 33-40

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, spoken by the old man (a longtime servant of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra) Euripides explores more deeply the role that fate and choice play in the lives of all Ancient Greeks. Commoners like the old man, as well as nobles like Agamemnon, all believe that the gods "see to" their fates and decides their destinies, "whether [they] like it or not." As the play unfolds, Euripides will examine the ways in which almost all of his characters feel completely helpless in the face of the signs and messages they receive from the gods and their oracles—and the ways in which this feeling of entrapment and helplessness often influences them to ignore their own agency over their lives and choices. The old man attempts to comfort Agamemnon by reminding him that fate can take many twists and turns over the course of one's life—and he is perhaps implying that some of these unforeseen twists can be tempered or even controlled by decisive action. However, Agamemnon is convinced that he has no power over his own circumstances. He feels himself to be completely at the mercy of others, an attitude that will have disastrous consequences for his family dynamic.

AGAMEMNON: because Menelaos is my brother, they chose
me to be their general.
I wish they had saved the honor for someone else.
And when the whole army had mustered
here at Aulis,
the wind died. Calm. We still cannot sail.
There is only one hope of our going,
according to Kalchas,
the prophet. Iphigeneia, my daughter,
must be sacrificed to Artemis,
the deity of this place.
Then the wind will take us to Troy,
and the city will fall to us.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Helen, Artemis, Iphigeneia , Kalchas, Menelaos, The Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 111-123

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Agamemnon laments to his servant, an old man, that he has been chosen to lead the Greek armies as they march against Troy. Agamemnon feels indebted to lead the army, as his brother Menelaos wants to sail to Troy to bring his wife Helen back from the clutches of the people he sees as "barbarians." However, Agamemnon doesn't want the power he's been given anymore because he has recently learned that in order for the ships to sail, he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to Artemis. This passage provides important practical context for the serious grief and guilt that weighs on Agamemnon throughout the play. But on a deeper level, it also examines the ways in which Agamemnon thinks about fate, duty, and the costs of war. Agamemnon is loyal to his brother Menelaos, and both siblings seek to honor their family's proud legacy. For this reason, Agamemnon feels bound to do whatever will help his brother regain his wife Helen and thus his lost pride. On the other hand, Agamemnon knows that restoring his pride will come at the cost of his eldest and favorite daughter's life. Thus, Agamemnon must decide whether to value his house's honor over the living, breathing members of his immediate family—a decision which will force him to question the larger implications of war and sacrifice as a means to achieving pride and glory.

CHORUS: I have crossed the narrows
of Euripos, I came sailing and I beached
at Aulis, on the sands. I left
Chalkis, my city, where the spring
of Arethousa wells up and runs flashing
down to the sea. I came
to see for myself this army of the [Greeks,]
the oar-winged ships of the heroes,
the thousand galleys
which blond Menelaos and Agamemnon of the same
great lineage sent,
as our husbands tell us,
to fetch Helen again:
Helen.

Related Characters: Chorus of Chalkidian Women (speaker), Helen, Agamemnon , Menelaos

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 205-218

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the chorus of Chalkidian women—the group who will provide commentary upon and explanation of the dramatic action for the rest of the play—arrives to tell their collective tale. The young women have come from far away, they declare, to catch a glimpse of the Greek army on its way to Troy. In this section of their lengthy introductory speech, they admire the "blond Menelaos and Agamemnon" and compare what their husbands have told them of the conflict between Greece and Troy to what they can now see with their own eyes. This speech is thematically significant because it shows how a group of young women think about the connection between war, pride, and glory, as well as the institutions of "great [family] lineage" and duty to that greatness. *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is a play deeply concerned with the roles women are forced to play in the spheres of the world dominated by men—which, in Ancient Greece, were almost all of them. The fact that a group of young foreign women control much of the exposition and commentary upon the play's action demonstrates Euripides's investment in exploring how women reconcile being shoved to the sidelines and only allowed to express their feelings in certain contexts and at certain times.

MENELAOS: At this point you'd never murder your daughter.
Well. This same sky
watched you speak otherwise. It's true
men find this happening to them
all the time. They sweat and clamber
for power until it's theirs,
then all at once they
fall back and amount to nothing again.

Related Characters: Menelaos (speaker), Artemis, Kalchas, Iphigeneia , Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 439-446

Explanation and Analysis

After Agamemnon tells Menelaos that he cannot and will not sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia—even though the girl's death is, according to the prophet Kalchas, the only thing that would reanimate the winds and allow the Greek armies to sail on Troy—Menelaos offers this speech in response to what he perceives as his brother's betrayal. This moment is significant because it provides a closer examination of how Menelaos and Agamemnon conceive of family and duty: Menelaos believes that his brother owes him fealty, because together the two of them represent the honor of the house of their forefathers. Agamemnon, however, shirks tradition and feels a duty to his immediate family—a duty which is steamrolled by a combination of Menelaos's wrath and the sense that there is some cosmic, fated significance to the goddess Artemis's demands on Iphigeneia's life. Euripides uses the relationship between the two brothers at the heart of the play to show how men who crave exaltation and pride negotiate conflicting priorities in the pursuit of personal glory.

AGAMEMNON: Oh miserable creature that I am, now what can I say? Where
can I begin in the face of this misery?
I have fallen into the snare of fate.
I laid my plan, but I was outwitted
from the start by the cunning of destiny.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Iphigeneia

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 574-581

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Euripides explores Agamemnon's feelings about fate and destiny versus choice and action—one of the play's central and most driving themes. Agamemnon calls himself a "miserable creature" who has "fallen into the snare of fate." He has no idea how to get himself out—and, by his own admission, doesn't even feel he has the language to adequately describe what he's going through. He blames the "cunning of destiny" for ruining his best-laid plans and he positions himself as a victim "outwitted" by the fates. All of this language is meant to underscore Agamemnon's self-pitying belief that he has no control over his own life or circumstances. He believes himself—whether out of piety or convenience—to be at the mercy of the gods. It is important to understand Agamemnon's mindset as the play moves forward and he faces down one of the most terrible decisions he's ever had to make: whether or not to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to appease the gods and enable his army to sail to Troy. Agamemnon feels paralyzed and unable to choose between his duty to his brother's pride (and thus his house's glory) and to his daughter's well-being. Because he's unable to decide how to act, he chooses to blame this indecision on fate and destiny rather than take the blame for his own moral and ideological ineptitude.

AGAMEMNON: Girl? Why do I call her a girl? When it seems that Hades
is about to make her his wife. Oh I
pity her. I can hear her
calling out to me, "Father!
Are you going to kill me? I hope that you
and everyone you love are married like this."
And Orestes will be there too, scarcely
old enough to walk, and he will
scream cries without words,
but my heart will know what they mean.
Oh what ruin Priam's son
Paris has brought me! All this he called down
by winning the love of Helen.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Menelaos, Helen, Paris, Orestes, Iphigeneia

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 600-613

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Agamemnon laments that he must sacrifice his eldest and favorite daughter, Iphigeneia, if he is to successfully lead his armies out of Aulis and across the sea to Troy. Agamemnon was willing to put a scheme to lure Iphigeneia to Aulis in motion—but now that the hour of reckoning is near, Agamemnon uses this speech to express the fears and reservations he's having about his decision to sacrifice his daughter to the gods. As Agamemnon imagines the moment of his daughter's death in horrible, excruciating detail, he quickly pivots to blaming the grotesque scene on "Priam's son Paris" and Menelaos's wife, Helen, whom Paris has stolen from Sparta and eloped with across the sea. In an earlier speech, Agamemnon blamed his suffering on fate and on the gods—now, he tries to blame his daughter's suffering and his family's grief on the romantic exploits of people he barely knows. Agamemnon sees himself as a victim of fate and destiny and does not feel able to stand up for his family's protection in the face of pressure from his brother.

AGAMEMNON: Even if I
could escape to Argos, they would follow me there.
They'd tear the city to the ground,
even the great walls that the Cyclopes built.
You see why I'm in despair. Almighty gods, how helpless
you have made me now!
There is nothing I can do.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Iphigeneia , Menelaos

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 714-720

Explanation and Analysis

After several lengthy back-and-forth exchanges, Agamemnon finally persuades his brother Menelaos to spare his daughter Iphigeneia—but as soon as Menelaos declares that Iphigeneia should live and that they should give up their campaign against Troy, Agamemnon falters. He states that it is too late for either of them to save Iphigeneia now—even if they were to let her live, the infuriated men of the Grecian army would kill Agamemnon and his children (and perhaps even Menelaos, too) out of indignity for the abandoned cause. This passage highlights many of the play's important themes. Agamemnon knows that men value pride and glory above all else, and that women in this society only exist in relation to the roles they perform for the men around them. Because of this, he knows, the armies will not take their leaders' abandonment of the cause against Troy lightly. Agamemnon still believes himself to be a victim of fate and destiny—he has the opportunity to make a choice that will save his daughter yet he refuses to do so out of fear. In this way, Agamemnon's feelings of being trapped become a self-fulfilling prophecy: he does nothing to escape his circumstances and so he remains controlled by them.

ACHILLES: It is not the same for all of us
having to wait here
by the straits. Some of us,
who have no wives, sit here by the shore, having left
empty houses at home. Others, who are married,
still have no children.
Such is the frenzy that has seized Greece
for this war,
not without the consent of the gods.

Related Characters: Achilles (speaker), Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1075-1084

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the great warrior Achilles has arrived at Agamemnon's tent to inquire of the leader of the armies what is taking so long in reanimating the stalled winds which prevent them from sailing on Troy. Achilles points out that many of his men are frustrated with the lack of movement—they are hungry for battle and the chance to restore honor and glory to Greece, but they have also left behind wives and children (or the opportunity to create children and thus pass on their family's lineage to future generations). Achilles blames the men's dissatisfaction on the "frenzy that has seized Greece"—in other words, he's suggesting that the war has made men hasty and desperate for the chance at battle. Achilles blames this frenzy on the gods. Like other characters in the play, Achilles sees himself as an instrument of the gods: he is subject to their whims, and his destiny, he believes, is inextricable from what they have laid out for him. Euripides includes this passage in order to hammer home the reach of the belief in destiny that ruled Ancient Greece and ultimately led to the outbreak of the Trojan War.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Son of a goddess, I, a mortal,
am not ashamed to clasp your knees. What good
would pride do me now? What matters more to me
than my daughter's life?

Related Characters: Clytemnestra (speaker), Agamemnon , Iphigeneia , Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1231-1234

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Clytemnestra has just learned from her servant that her husband, Agamemnon, plans to sacrifice their daughter Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis. Agamemnon has lured Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia to Aulis under false pretenses by promising Iphigeneia's marriage to the warrior Achilles. Buckling under the tragic weight of what she's learned, Clytemnestra falls to her knees and clasps Achilles's legs, begging him to help her spare her daughter's life. This passage is significant because it shows how Clytemnestra understands her role as a woman—she must rely on a man to help her—and her relationships to the concepts of duty, family, pride, glory, and fate. Clytemnestra refers to herself as a "mortal," but she knows that as both a man and a "son of a goddess," Achilles may be able to turn the tides of fate better than she. Clytemnestra blatantly declares that she cares less for her sense of pride than her daughter's life—she is the only character in the play to so vocally value something above a sense of pride or glory. Though short, this passage encompasses a woman's reasoning as she confronts her relationship to the many concepts and codes of conduct which govern Greek society.

ACHILLES: Pride rises up in me
and draws me on. But I have learned
to curb my grief in adversity, and my joy
in triumph.
Mortals who have learned this
can hope to live by reason.

Related Characters: Achilles (speaker), Agamemnon , Iphigeneia , Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1265-1270

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Achilles has just learned of the fact that Agamemnon has, without his permission, used Achilles's name behind his back in order to lure Iphigeneia to Aulis by claiming she was to be married to the great warrior. Achilles is offended that his name would be used without his consent and he is angered by Agamemnon's betrayal of his own child—yet here, Achilles declares his intent to "curb" his wild emotions and stay calm. Achilles is a great warrior and the son of a goddess; he has the respect of his fellow men and all the armies who are following him into battle against Troy. What separates Achilles from his fellow men, however, is his ability to "live by reason" even in difficult circumstances. Achilles knows there is no pride, honor, or glory in allowing one's hubris to subsume one's life, and for this reason Euripides lifts Achilles up as one of the moral centers of the play.

ACHILLES: I will be watching, in the right place.
You will not have to be stared at
hunting through the troops to find me. Do nothing
that would disgrace your fathers.
Tyndareos should not suffer shame.
He was a great man in Greece.

Related Characters: Achilles (speaker), Iphigeneia , Agamemnon , Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1408-1413

Explanation and Analysis

After Clytemnestra begs Achilles to help her convince Agamemnon—through reason or through force—to spare Iphigeneia's life, Achilles suggests that Clytemnestra should attempt to talk to Agamemnon first and reason with him. In this passage, Achilles promises to stay nearby while Clytemnestra confronts her treasonous husband—but although he has sworn to help Clytemnestra, his speech toward her is still tinged with reminders that this is a man's world and that Clytemnestra's primary role within it is to "do nothing / that would disgrace [her fore]fathers." Achilles is careful to remind Clytemnestra to stay in her place and not enter the tent city and go "hunting through the troops" to find him—he doesn't want to be embarrassed by the presence of a woman, or worse, put Clytemnestra in a position where she'd be vulnerable to legions of frustrated, lonely men. This passage, then, brings into question whether Achilles is only willing to help Clytemnestra

because of her great lineage; were she a woman of low or unremarkable birth, Euripides seems to suggest, she might be met with a very different fate.

CHORUS: But you, Iphigeneia, on your lovely hair the Argives will set
a wreath, as on the brows
of a spotted heifer, led down
from caves in the mountains
to the sacrifice,
and the knife will open the throat
and let the blood of a girl.
And you were not
brought up to the sound of the shepherd's pipe
and the cries of the herdsmen,
but nurtured by your mother
to be a bride for one of great Inachos' sons.
Oh where is the noble face
of modesty, or the strength of virtue, now
that blasphemy is in power
and men have put justice
behind them, and there is no law but lawlessness,
and none join in fear of the gods?

Related Characters: Chorus of Chalkidian Women (speaker), Achilles, Artemis, Clytemnestra , Iphigeneia

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1455-1473

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the chorus of Chalkidian women, which has been commenting upon the action throughout the duration of the play, steps forward to lament Iphigeneia's cruel fate as a sacrifice to the goddess Artemis. The women's speech engages with many of the play's major thematic ideas. Their words are florid and their speech is reverent, which makes it seem at first as if they are describing Iphigeneia's march to glory as she heads to the sacrificial altar—but parsing their language further reveals that they are comparing Iphigeneia to a cow that is to be sacrificed, lamenting that "the blood of a girl" should spill just as a heifer's normally does upon the sacrificial altar. The chorus also points out that Iphigeneia—unlike her would-be husband Achilles—was not "brought up to the sound[s]" of freedom and possibility, but rather "nurtured […] to be a bride" for the son of a great man. The chorus ends its speech by lamenting how men have "put justice behind them"—they should "fear […] the gods" for what they are going to do to the innocent Iphigeneia. The chorus, comprised of women, knows that the cruel twists of fate and destiny are especially unjust for women, and in this speech it decries the cruelty that Iphigeneia has faced all her life.

AGAMEMNON: Oh immovable law of heaven! Oh my anguish, my relentless fate!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Yours? Mine. Hers. No relenting for any of us.

Related Characters: Clytemnestra , Agamemnon (speaker), Artemis, Iphigeneia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1526-1528

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Clytemnestra confronts her husband, Agamemnon, about his deceit of her and their daughter Iphigeneia and about his plans to sacrifice Iphigeneia to the goddess Artemis. Faced with his deceptions and cruelties against his own family, Agamemnon curses his "relentless fate" and declares the "immovable law of heaven" responsible for his suffering and loss of control over his own life. Clytemnestra stoically and shortly points out that Agamemnon is not the only one who suffers at the hands of fate—she and Iphigeneia, too, are unable to control their circumstances. Clytemnestra's statement also implies that as women, she and Iphigenia have been—and will continue to be—greater victims of fate as their lives unfold. As women, they are of less value to society than men, and so they are the ones who truly face an "immovable" position and a "relentless" onslaught of deceit, manipulation, and control.

IPHIGENEIA: And now you want to kill me. Oh, in the name
of Pelops, of your father
Atreus, of my mother, suffering here
again as at my birth, do not let it happen.

Related Characters: Iphigeneia (speaker), Clytemnestra , Agamemnon

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1653-1656

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Iphigeneia begs her father, Agamemnon, outright to spare her life, she uses a rhetorical strategy that she knows (or at least hopes) will appeal to her father's worldview. Iphigenia knows that Agamemnon means to sacrifice her in order to secure Greece's glory in the coming war against Troy, but she attempts here to show her father that in killing her, he may actually do the opposite of bringing glory onto their house's name. She begs him "in the name" of his father and grandfather, Atreus and Pelops, to let her live. This passage demonstrates that Iphigeneia knows that, as a woman, she has little influence on the men around her—in order to get what she wants, she must try to appeal to her father's sense of duty to the honor and glory of his house's lineage. Iphigeneia attempts to invoke her own mother's suffering, too—but does so *after* having invoked her male ancestors, as she knows her society considers a woman's pain to be miniscule compared to a man's glory.

AGAMEMNON: It is Greece that compels me
to sacrifice you, whatever I wish.
We are in stronger hands than our own.
Greece must be free
if you and I can make her so. Being Greeks,
we must not be subject to barbarians,
we must not let them carry off our wives.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Paris, Helen, Menelaos, Iphigeneia

Related Themes:

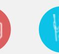
Page Number: 1706-1712

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Agamemnon confronts his daughter Iphigeneia directly for the first time about his decision to lure her to Aulis so that he can sacrifice her to the goddess Artemis and thus enable his armies to sail on Troy. Here, Agamemnon pleads with Iphigeneia to understand the impossible position in which he's found himself. In this short but thematically significant passage, Agamemnon invokes all of the play's major ideological concerns in his rhetorical appeal to his daughter. First, Agamemnon reminds Iphigeneia of the role of fate and destiny in all their lives; he tells her that he is "compel[led]" by forces beyond his control and he carefully reminds her that they all are in "stronger hands than [their] own"—meaning the hands of the gods, of destiny itself, or some combination of the two. Next, Agamemnon tells Iphigeneia that together they can "make" Greece free—the implication behind these words is that it is the sacred duty of their house to undertake the mission of Greece's freedom. Finally, Agamemnon admits that he is motivated to sacrifice Iphigeneia and sail on Troy because of his own pride and because of the honor he feels his country is owed. He doesn't want Greece to gain a reputation for being a nation that lets "barbarians" rule them and "carry off [their] wives." The role of women in Ancient Greek society is to express duty and fealty to their husbands and their lineages—not to have any romantic or sexual desire of their own that might bring shame or discord upon their families.

IPHIGENEIA: It is hard to hold out against the inevitable.
[...]
Now mother, listen to the conclusion
that I have reached. I have made up my mind to die.
I want to come to it
with glory. [...]
You brought me into the world for the sake
of everyone in my country.

Related Characters: Iphigeneia (speaker), Clytemnestra

Related Themes: 

Page Number: Lines 1839-1864

Explanation and Analysis

Up until this point, Iphigeneia has been railing against her fate and those who have influenced it, begging her father to spare her, and lamenting the cruelty women face in a world dominated by men. Here, however, Iphigeneia makes a quick decision to stop "hold[ing] out against the inevitable" and give her life for Greece. She wants to die in "glory" and she has decided to reframe her entire conception of her life and its purpose in order to convince herself to continue on the path toward exaltation and fame. In reality, Iphigeneia is resigning herself to a terrible fate that has been decided for her by the conniving, disloyal men in her own family—but in order to make such a fate palatable, she decides to convince herself that her death is an opportunity to glorify Greece, bring honor to her house, and decide for herself what her role in the world will be.

IPHIGENEIA: If it means that one man can see the sunlight
what are the lives of thousands of women
in the balance? And if Artemis
demands the offering of my body,
I am a mortal: who am I
to oppose the goddess? It is not to be
considered. I give my life to Greece.

Related Characters: Iphigeneia (speaker), Agamemnon , Artemis, Achilles, Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: Lines 1880-1886

Explanation and Analysis

As Iphigeneia continues her lengthy speech about her decision to willingly offer herself up as a sacrifice to Artemis, she speaks about the role of women's lives in a world of men. Iphigeneia's conclusions in this passage can be viewed two ways: they can be taken literally at face value, or they can be seen as her desperately satirizing a world which forces her to place her own life at a lesser value than the lives of the men around her. Either way, there doesn't seem to be any doubt that Euripides is using this passage to highlight the unfairness of the roles prescribed to women in a world dominated by men. Iphigeneia knows that her life is not worth that of a thousand men's—whether she willingly accepts this fact or throws it back in everyone's faces as she marches to her death depends on the actress's interpretation of the words. The bottom line, however, remains that Iphigeneia—like her father, Agamemnon—sees herself now as a victim of fate who must rearrange her conception of what's happening to her, and her part in it, in order to rise above anger and grief. Iphigeneia decides to submit to her fate in hopes of attaining glory rather than railing against the path she believes the gods have chosen for her.

MESSENGER: And the miracle happened. Everyone
distinctly heard the sound of the knife
striking, but no one could see
the girl. She had vanished.
The priest cried out, and the whole army
echoed him, seeing
what some god had sent, a thing
nobody could have prophesied. There it was,
we could see it, but we could scarcely
believe it: a deer
lay there gasping, a large
beautiful animal, and its blood ran
streaming over the altar of the goddess.

Related Characters: A Messenger (speaker), Artemis, Kalchas, Agamemnon , Iphigeneia , Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: Lines 2121-2133

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of the play, after Iphigeneia has gone willingly to meet her father at the sacrificial altar, a messenger returns to Clytemnestra to relay to her a miraculous piece of news. As the messenger describes Iphigeneia's salvation at the altar, Euripides employs a *deus ex machina*, or unlikely last-minute solution to an impossible problem. Artemis replaces Iphigeneia with a deer at the very moment of sacrifice—and because deer are the animals sacred to Artemis, and because Artemis stalled the winds in Aulis after Agamemnon offended her by killing one on his way to the port, her gift of a deer mirrors Agamemnon's own sacrifice and Iphigeneia's willing offering of her life. Iphigeneia's story will now, as she had hoped it would, become a legend about sacrifice and glory; the fates have intervened on her behalf, and while she is not allowed to live on earth any longer, she has been lifted up to a heavenly existence alongside the gods.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

IPHIGENEIA AT AULIS

At predawn, the Greek army is camped near the bay at Aulis in front of Agamemnon's tent. The ships are stalled in the harbor, waiting for favorable winds. Agamemnon comes out of his tent holding a letter. He paces in front of his tent "in great indecision" for several moments and he calls for his attendant, an old man, to come out from the tent quickly. The old man exits the tent, stating that he can't sleep in his old age anyway.

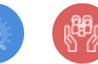
The audience's first introduction to the play's protagonist and central figure, Agamemnon, shows him in a vulnerable light. He is one of the most powerful men in Greece yet he's in a moment of serious struggle and uncertainty.

Agamemnon tells his attendant that he's nervous about the "silent" winds. The old man asks why Agamemnon is so wide awake and nervous at such an hour—all is safe and still in the city. Agamemnon says he envies the man his calm and his ability to live a quiet life "unnoticed by fame." The old man insists that men like Agamemnon, who have authority, have "the good of life." Agamemnon, however, insists that the "honor" that comes with power is nothing but a "trap." Sometimes powerful men lose everything through conflict with the gods—but sometimes, they squander it themselves.

Agamemnon's whole life has been a fight for honor, glory, and renown—but now that he has it all, he's still unhappy. In fact, he feels even more unseated by his "fame" than he did by his obscurity. This suggests that the play will examine the reality of the struggle for pride and glory—and reveal that such pursuits are not always worthy.

The old man reminds Agamemnon that his father, Atreus, did not bring him into a perfect world—it is normal for one's life to contain both joy and suffering. The old man points out the letter Agamemnon is holding. He says he knows that Agamemnon is agonizing over the letter, repeatedly sealing and unsealing it and even crying as he tries to erase what he's already written. The old man begs Agamemnon to tell him what's in the letter so that he can advise him as to what to do with it. The old man reminds Agamemnon that he's known him for years—he is Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra's, slave and he was even in their wedding party.

Even though the old man is bound to serve Clytemnestra and Agamemnon as their slave, he expresses genuine sympathy and caring for them. The old man's understanding of family and duty is greater than Agamemnon's—even though the two of them are not bound by blood but instead by social hierarchy and tradition.



Agamemnon reflects on his family's history. His wife, Clytemnestra, is the daughter of Leda and Tyndareos. Clytemnestra's sister Helen is now the catalyst behind the bloody Trojan War. Tyndareos knew that Helen's great beauty would bring strife to the world so he made her suitors swear an oath to accept whomever Helen chose as her rightful husband. After Helen married Agamemnon's brother Menelaos, however, a young and handsome man named Paris arrived to tempt Helen. Paris carried Helen away with him, and now Menelaos has called upon Helen's other suitors—the oath-bearers—to rise up against Paris alongside him. The Greeks have "rushed to arms" and are now preparing to sail on Troy. The winds, however, have died, and the troops are stranded.

Agamemnon's explanation of his family's complicated lineage and entanglements serves two purposes. First, it provides exposition and context for the events that are about to take place. Second, it shows how seriously Agamemnon takes the bonds of family and duty. This passage also introduces the idea of pride and glory as justification for war: Menelaos's pride has been hurt, so now his entire country is going into battle to restore his manhood and his honor.

Agamemnon reveals the source of his pain. There is only one way to get the winds moving again: according to the prophet Kalchas, Agamemnon must sacrifice his own daughter Iphigeneia to Artemis, the deity of Aulis. If he does, the winds will pick up and the Greeks' victory over Troy will be assured. When Agamemnon heard this prophecy, he called for the armies to return home, knowing he could never kill his own daughter—but Menelaos begged his brother for help. Agamemnon has sent a letter to Clytemnestra asking her to send Iphigeneia to Aulis under false pretenses. He is claiming that the powerful warrior Achilles has demanded Iphigeneia as his bride, knowing that Clytemnestra would go along with such a plan.

This passage introduces the terrible choice at the heart of the play: Agamemnon must decide whether he is going to put his own immediate family first or whether he is going to betray them for the sake of his brother's pride and thus his house's honor. Agamemnon is in a terrible spot, and Euripides's audience likely would have empathized deeply with the many complicated and heavy considerations weighing on him.

Agamemnon regrets sending the letter and putting such a devastating plan of action in motion. He now wants to send a second letter begging his wife to ignore the first. The old man sympathetically asks Agamemnon to read the new letter aloud. Agamemnon reads the simple letter aloud: it asks Clytemnestra to keep Iphigeneia at home. The old man asks if Achilles will be angry if his bride doesn't show up. Agamemnon reveals that the entire wedding is a ruse—Achilles doesn't know his name has been used in the plot to lure Iphigeneia to Aulis.

Agamemnon is attempting to change the tides of fate he himself has set in motion by calling Iphigeneia to Aulis in the first place. This passage shows that Agamemnon—for now—believes that actions can indeed influence one's destiny, but as the play progresses, he will surrender himself more and more to the twists and turns of chance and fate.

The old man tells Agamemnon that he is "appall[ed]" by Agamemnon's actions—but he is bound to do the king's bidding. Agamemnon orders the old man to run swiftly to deliver the letter without stopping to rest even once. Agamemnon asks the old man to keep an eye out on the road for any chariot that might already be bearing Iphigeneia toward Aulis. If the old man meets her on the road he must escort her back home to Mycenae. Agamemnon, noticing that dawn has begun to break, hands the letter to the old man and bids him goodbye. As the old man leaves, Agamemnon laments the "bitterness" all mortals must face while alive. He returns to his tent.

Agamemnon clearly wants to change his and his daughter's fate and he knows that he has only one opportunity to do so. Agamemnon is, in this passage, just as disgusted with himself as the old man is—but he still blames his problems on the inherent "bitterness" of life, which he sees as a problem of fate rather than a circumstance of his own making.

A chorus of young Chalkidian women enters. The women breathlessly claim to have come from far away just to lay eyes on the vast Grecian army. They describe watching the soldiers, waiting for the winds to pick up, busying themselves by playing games and racing horses. The women know many of the soldiers by name, and seem rapturously spellbound by the men's beauty, strength, and antics. The only thing that has brought the women more "pleasure" than looking upon the soldiers themselves is the sight of the massive Grecian fleet—there are ships from Phthia, the Argives, Attica, Boiotia, Mycenae, and more major Grecian cities. Everyone has banded together to defend Menelaos's honor and secure vengeance "on the bride who […] abandoned his house to lie with a barbarian." The women state that they will never forget the impressive, imposing sight of the fleet.

The chorus of Chalkidian women exists within the play to comment upon the action, to provide exposition, and to mark changes in scene. In this speech, the women show their devotion to the Greek armies—they clearly seem to be in support of the war and they glorify the men who are preparing to fight in it. Euripides uses this chorus of women to show how in Ancient Greece, women are always forced to the sidelines to admire the feats of men, even as they themselves remain homogenous, anonymous spectators.

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Menelaos and the old man enter. They are fighting. Menelaos tells the old man that he is "too loyal" to Agamemnon and that he shouldn't meddle in things he doesn't understand. The old man chides Menelaos for opening a letter not meant for him and begs Menelaos to give it back. When Menelaos refuses, the old man latches onto him. He says he doesn't care if Menelaos beats him—he'll die for his master if need be. The old man begins screaming for Agamemnon.

Menelaos has intercepted the old man's journey. This is one of many instances in the play which the other characters can interpret as both a twist of fate and a consequence of action. Euripides at times deliberately blurs the lines between the two in order to show how fate and destiny are complex, difficult concepts which actually feed off of choice and action.

Agamemnon exits his tent and orders the old man back inside. He asks Menelaos what has happened. Menelaos holds up the letter and declares that it was meant to "betray" the Greek cause. He accuses Agamemnon of acting behind his back, then threatens to read the letter to the entire army. Agamemnon accuses Menelaos of spying. Menelaos justifies his spying by stating that he doesn't trust Agamemnon—and never has. Agamemnon's mind is "true to nothing and no one."

Menelaos accuses Agamemnon of being hollow and disloyal to anyone but himself. Menelaos doesn't understand the complicated problems Agamemnon is trying to work through and the many different people and situations tugging at the strings of his loyalty to discern where it lies.

Menelaos urges Agamemnon to remember how excited he was to lead an army against Troy. Agamemnon was, according to Menelaos, desperate to be general—but since the winds have stalled, Agamemnon has become isolated and insecure. Menelaos reminds Agamemnon that he came to Menelaos in a moment of desperation, begging to know what could be done to make the winds rise. Menelaos fetched the prophet Kalchas who decreed that Iphigeneia must be sacrificed to Artemis. Menelaos accuses Agamemnon of being the kind of man who "sweat[s] and clamber[s] for power" yet buckles under the pressure of leadership once he achieves it. Menelaos accuses Agamemnon of securing Greece's "mortification" through his own cowardice. The chorus, still looking on, laments how terrible it is "when discord divides brothers."

Menelaos uses this rant to point out how Agamemnon was loyal to the Greek cause up until the very moment it required something of him directly. Menelaos knows that his sense of pride—and his family's legacy of honor—is riding on the events to come, and he doesn't want Agamemnon's selfishness to interfere with that. By the same token, however, Menelaos is being selfish in demanding so much of his brother—he's just too full of hubris to see it. The chorus, the voice of reason, laments that the brothers cannot put aside their competing loyalties and realize that their foremost duty is to each other.

Agamemnon declares that it is now his turn to speak—but that unlike his brother, he plans to keep his speech "brief [and] restrained." He states that "no man who amounts to anything is without a sense of shame" and he asks what, exactly, Menelaos is after. Menelaos picked an unvirtuous wife; Agamemnon doesn't believe he himself should have to suffer because of his brother's lapse in judgment. He accuses Menelaos of having abandoned his decency and his common sense alike in pursuit of Helen—instead, Agamemnon suggests, Menelaos should be grateful that the gods "took a bad wife off [his] hands."

Agamemnon has joined his brother's cause, up to this point, without really questioning whether it's even worth it to go to war over one man's pride. Having been faced with a terrible decision to make about his own family's involvement, however, Agamemnon is reevaluating not just his own ideas of glory and pride, but his understanding of how fate and destiny work. Perhaps, he suggests, Helen's elopement with Paris was actually a gift to Menelaos from the gods themselves.

Agamemnon declares that he will not kill his child in pursuit of the false, shaky kind of justice that Menelaos now pursues in attacking Troy. In simply considering killing Iphigeneia, Agamemnon says, he has committed an "unholy crime" that he must repent for the rest of his life. Agamemnon asks Menelaos to do his best to understand. The chorus commends Agamemnon for staunchly "refusing to harm a child."

Agamemnon knows that he is facing a huge moral decision: he must choose whether to put his children before his house's pride and honor. Agamemnon seems to have made his mind up and decided to protect Iphigeneia at any cost—but as the play continues, he will have to continue wrestling with the competing demands of family, fate, and leadership.

Menelaos begs Agamemnon to stand beside him, share his troubles, and be a true friend and brother to him. Agamemnon, however, accuses Menelaos himself of acting unbrotherly. Menelaos asks if Agamemnon will really abandon the Grecian cause, but Agamemnon retorts that Greece, like Menelaos himself, has been "driven mad." As Menelaos declares that he'll find "other friends" to help him, a messenger enters and announces that Iphigeneia has arrived along with her mother, Clytemnestra, and her younger brother, Orestes. The messenger says he knows Agamemnon will be happy at the joyous news of his family's arrival. The messenger also alerts Agamemnon to the fact that exciting rumors of a wedding are swirling throughout camp.

The arrival of Agamemnon's family at the end of this passage represents a new twist of fate. Agamemnon has failed to keep his family safe from his own plot against them and now he must reckon with them directly. Agamemnon will now have to choose more immediately whether he's going to keep up the ruse he's created to benefit Menelaos, or whether he will betray his brother and save his daughter.

Agamemnon thanks the messenger and sends him inside to rest. Alone with Menelaos once again, Agamemnon offers up a lament: he regrets having "fallen into the snare of fate." He has no idea what to do—men of his rank and stature are not allowed to show grief or uncertainty. Agamemnon declares himself a "slave of the mob [he] lead[s.]" He wonders how he will look his wife, daughter, and infant son in the face when he is about to do something so horrible. Agamemnon ends his rant by blaming Helen and Paris for all of his strife. The chorus declares that although they are women and strangers, they sympathize with the king's struggles.

In this passage, Agamemnon decries the way he feels that his fate has entrapped him. Agamemnon takes the arrival of his family to signal that he's locked into the plot he's already developed—he's unwilling or unable to see the opportunity he still has to turn things around and take control of his and his family's destinies.

Menelaos asks for Agamemnon's hand. He takes it and swears upon it that by their father Atreus and their grandfather Pelops, he will not oppose Agamemnon any longer; he takes back all he said before. Menelaos begs Agamemnon not to kill Iphigeneia—it is not "just," he says, that this brother should suffer so that he can be satisfied. Menelaos says that he can find a new wife, but he could never find a new brother were he to lose Agamemnon's love or trust. He tells Agamemnon to order the troops to break up and retreat from Aulis. The chorus commends Menelaos's "noble" words and declares that his ancestors would be proud of him.

Menelaos turns out to have been moved deeply by Agamemnon's lament—and perhaps by the realization that his own sister-in-law, niece, and nephew have come to the camp. The fact that Menelaos, the more prideful and aggressive brother, is actually the one to relent first demonstrates that there is no fate that's inescapable; there is always time to seize one's own destiny.

Agamemnon thanks Menelaos honestly for his kind words but he declares that it is too late—Agamemnon has reached a point of no return and he will now be forced to kill his daughter by the very armies he's gathered. If the troops hear that Agamemnon has sent his daughter home and betrayed their cause, they'll revolt against him or perhaps even hunt Iphigeneia down and kill her themselves. Menelaos suggests they kill Kalchas the prophet to keep him from breathing a word about Agamemnon's plot to sacrifice his daughter to Artemis.

Agamemnon believes himself to be a victim of fate—he believes that the armies are frenzied enough to kill anyone whom they believe might stand in between them and the chance at glory and victory over Troy. Agamemnon doesn't have enough faith in his power as a leader to even venture that he might be able to control his troops.

Agamemnon points out that there is someone else who "knows everything": Odysseus, the son of Sisyphos. Menelaos says that he doesn't see a reason for Odysseus to rise up against either Agamemnon or himself. However, after thinking it over for a minute, Menelaos realizes that Odysseus has a "terrible love" of power. Agamemnon says he can picture Odysseus telling his army of Agamemnon's failed promise and rallying them together to kill himself, Menelaos, and Iphigeneia. Agamemnon says that even if he were to escape home with his wife and children, Odysseus and his army could very well follow them there. Agamemnon curses the gods for rendering him "helpless." He begs Menelaos not to let his wife learn anything of his plot and then he turns to the chorus and asks them to do the same. Menelaos goes back to the camp and Agamemnon retreats into his tent.

Though Odysseus (the protagonist of Homer's Odyssey*) is not a character in this play, Agamemnon uses the power-hungry man as a way of justifying his own paralysis in the face of his armies. Agamemnon is very keen to blame his helplessness on anyone else—on the gods, on Odysseus, on the very arrival of his family—but never questions his own agency or ability to influence others.*

The chorus offers up another lament for those who have been "burned alive" by the madness of the passions inspired by the goddess of love, Aphrodite. The chorus begs the gods to "let [them] know love within reason." They express their sympathies for Paris, whose worst crime was falling in love with the beautiful Helen—an incident that has now inspired the Greeks to arm themselves and head onward to Troy to sack the city.

The chorus, too, feels that the gods are unstoppable forces against which mere mortals are helpless. The gods steer fate and destiny while men and women see themselves as hapless victims of fate. This attitude reflects the beliefs of many of Euripides's contemporaries.

Clytemnestra, Iphigeneia, and Orestes, escorted by a chorus of attendants, arrive in a chariot. The chorus of attendants announces their family's lineage of great ancestors and rejoices in the "momentous […] occasion" that has brought them to Aulis. The chorus of Chalkidian women steps forward to help Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia from their chariot, explaining to the two Mycenean women that they, too, are strangers in the land of Aulis. Clytemnestra tells the chorus of women that their kind greeting is a good omen.

Clytemnestra instantly bonds with the chorus—as women, they all know they must stick together and help one another. Aulis is not just a strange land—at this time, it is also a military tent city entirely populated by men. The women new to the area know they must tread lightly and not overstep the roles prescribed to them.

While the chorus of attendants removes the gifts comprising Iphigeneia's dowry from the chariot and carries them inside, Clytemnestra gives a speech in which she fawns over her children. She tells the sleeping infant Orestes that when he wakes it will be his sister's wedding day. Clytemnestra is clearly looking forward to Iphigeneia's marriage to Achilles. As Agamemnon enters to greet his family, Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra rush to embrace him. Iphigeneia is especially happy to see her father—Clytemnestra remarks that Iphigeneia is the child who loves her father most. Iphigeneia thanks her father for bringing her here to be married but she remarks that her father's eyes look "troubled." Agamemnon replies only that a king has many burdens, but in an aside to the audience, he laments that he will not be able to "contain [his] suffering" much longer.

In this passage, Euripides employs tragic irony in order to highlight the awkwardness and pain of the meeting between Agamemnon and his family. Though both Agamemnon and the audience know that he is about to betray them, Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia (and certainly the infant Orestes) are blissfully unaware of what is in store for them. Agamemnon is clearly struggling greatly with the burden he feels he must bear as he succumbs to what he believes is the will of the fates.

Agamemnon blames his sad mood on the impending war and the separation from his family it will bring. Iphigeneia says she wishes the men of Greece could lay down their weapons, but Agamemnon gravely retorts that the army must "destroy [many] others" before they rest. Iphigeneia laments that her father must leave her behind, declaring that she wishes she could accompany him to Troy. Agamemnon tells Iphigeneia that she has a long journey of her own to make—but before either of them can begin their journeys, he has a sacrifice to make here in Aulis. Iphigeneia expresses excitement about attending a sacrificial ceremony. Agamemnon again laments the terrible spot he's in and begins crying about how much he'll miss his daughter. Iphigeneia, however, still believes Agamemnon is talking about her impending marriage. She happily goes inside the tent.

Agamemnon decides to tell a partial truth in order to assuage some of his own guilt. He admits that a sacrifice is going to take place but he allows Iphigeneia to believe that the sacrifice is happening as a kind of blessing for her marriage to Achilles. Agamemnon has ample opportunity to tell his family what's going on, warn them, and save them from danger—but he believes himself to already be a victim of fate and so he does nothing.

Agamemnon turns to face his wife, Clytemnestra. He begs her forgiveness for his show of grief over Iphigeneia's "marriage." Clytemnestra tells Agamemnon that she's feeling the same grief but then she reassures him that they'll get through their separation from their daughter together. She asks Agamemnon to tell her more about Achilles, the man Iphigeneia is to marry. Agamemnon reveals that Achilles is descended from a proud lineage: he is the daughter of Thetis, a water nymph, and Peleus, a powerful king. After hearing about the details of Achilles's parentage, Clytemnestra declares him a suitable match for her daughter.

In this passage, as Clytemnestra asks about the lineage of the man who is about to join their family, it becomes clear just how important legacy and family are to the Greeks. Euripides employs a kind of tragic irony here, again, as he forces Agamemnon to admit just how unwilling he is to put his own family above the pride associated with a great family lineage.

Clytemnestra asks if Agamemnon has made the required sacrifice to the gods on Iphigeneia's behalf, and Agamemnon replies that he hasn't yet. Clytemnestra asks about the other wedding preparations, such as the banquets for the men and women in attendance, but Agamemnon tells her that he wants her to return home before the wedding—he alone will give Iphigeneia away and hold the bridal torches at the ceremony. Clytemnestra says that she hates disobeying her husband but that she feels such a plan is wrong. Agamemnon reminds Clytemnestra that they have other daughters waiting at home and suggests his wife's place is with them, but Clytemnestra refuses to leave before her Iphigeneia's wedding. She turns and goes inside the tent.

Here, Agamemnon puts forth a mild attempt to protect Clytemnestra from what's about to happen—but he still shows no signs of actually trying to stop what he has in store for Iphigeneia. It seems Agamemnon simply doesn't want his wife around to witness his betrayal and add to his guilt.

Agamemnon laments having failed to send Clytemnestra away—now, she will be a direct witness to his terrible deceit. He goes off to meet with Kalchas, the prophet who will perform the sacrifice. Though Agamemnon hates what he must do, he knows he "owe[s] it to Greece." He exits.

Agamemnon has barely tried to change his circumstances, yet continues lamenting how terrible his station is. He has decided, once and for all, to put his country's pride and glory above his own family—and he can hardly stand himself for it.

The chorus of Chalkidian women steps forward to sing of what Agamemnon and his army will encounter once they set sail for Troy. They predict that the Greek army will have Ares, the god of war, on their side as they storm the ramparts of Troy to repossess Helen. The women predict terrible slaughter and bloodshed and they pray that neither they themselves, nor their children or their children's children, ever have to know such anguish and misery. The women hope that one day, the story of Helen will be little more than a distant myth to future generations.

The Chalkidian women imagine the violence and terror waiting across the sea in Troy with a mixture of revulsion and excitement. They hope that no wars like this will be fought in future generations but they know that this one must bring enough pride and glory to last a long time if that is to be the case. Above all, the women are hoping for the men of the Greek armies to bring honor to their country.

The younger soldier Achilles enters and demands to see Agamemnon. Achilles is upset and frustrated by the decision to keep the armies in Aulis for so long while waiting idly for the winds to change. Many of his men have left behind wives and children to participate in the "frenzy" of the war only to be left sitting idly while leadership—the "sons of Atreus"—fret over what to do. Achilles, on behalf of his men, demands an answer to how much longer it will be before the troops are able to set sail.

Achilles has come to see Agamemnon purely by chance. He has no idea that his name has been used to lure Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia to Aulis. He also seems contemptuous of the army's leadership in spite of their great lineage, demonstrating his investment not in glory or honor but in decency and goodness.

Clytemnestra exits the tent and introduces herself, greeting Achilles warmly. Achilles, however, is disgusted to see a woman at camp. He says he can't be seen talking with women and begins to walk away. Clytemnestra begs Achilles to stop and she gives him her hand, reminding him that their families are soon to be united—he is about to marry her daughter. Achilles "recoils in horror" and accuses Clytemnestra of suffering "some delusion." Clytemnestra tells Achilles it's okay to be shy, but Achilles insists he knows nothing of any impending marriage. Clytemnestra says that Achilles's words are just as shocking to her as hers clearly are to him. She laments having been deceived by her husband. Declaring herself humiliated, she begins to go inside, but Achilles tells her to wait—he wants to go in and see Agamemnon himself.

Achilles's violent reaction to seeing a woman present in the camp full of soldiers is likely indicative of Ancient Greek culture more broadly: it's bizarre for a woman to be present in a sphere dominated by men. Achilles is also deeply offended by the fact that his name has been used without his consent. He's not sure what's going on but he feels humiliated and insecure—and he demands to see Agamemnon to get to the bottom of what's going on. Though Achilles is more levelheaded than his male counterparts, his first reaction in a moment of unsteadiness is still to lament the loss of his pride.

Suddenly, a voice from inside calls to both Clytemnestra and Achilles—it is the old man. He asks if anyone is outside with them. They tell him they are alone. The old man comes outside, lamenting that what he has feared most has indeed come to pass. Clytemnestra begs her longtime servant to explain to her what's going on. The old man tells Clytemnestra that Agamemnon plans to kill Iphigeneia with his own hands. Clytemnestra laments that her husband has gone mad and asks what "demon" could've tempted him to do such a terrible dead. The old man, however, says that no demon but rather the prophet Kalchas has decreed that only the sacrifice of Iphigeneia to Artemis can bring the winds needed to take the Greek army to Troy.

The old man is one of the few characters who feels allegiance to "family" rather than personal glory. Though he is a slave of Clytemnestra's and will never be seen as her equal, he still feels loyalty toward her even after all she and her family have put him through. Euripides perhaps intended to show his audiences that the old man's decisions are honorable and that pride and glory can come from loyalty and goodness rather than violence and shows of physical bravery.

The old man laments the terrible fate that Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra now face but he also expresses sympathy for the "monstrous decision" Agamemnon has been forced to make. Clytemnestra asks how the old man came to learn all of this. He explains that Agamemnon ordered him to carry a letter to Clytemnestra asking her to cancel her journey to Aulis, but that Menelaos intercepted him from delivering it. Clytemnestra asks if Achilles has heard all the old man has said, and Achilles says he has. He declares that he's taking none of it "lightly."

The old man appears every so often to illustrate just how terrible things are for everyone involved in the plot to sacrifice Iphigeneia. Agamemnon may be behind the deception of Clytemnestra, Iphigeneia, and Achilles, but he himself is not entirely to blame. The old man's nuanced approach to the conflict at hand represents the voice of reason in a cacophony of confusion, anger, and misdirection.

Clytemnestra falls to her knees, grasps Achilles's legs, and begs the "son of a goddess" to save her and Iphigeneia. Clytemnestra admits that she cannot blame Achilles if he does nothing to defend Iphigeneia—she knows he has been roped into this as unwittingly as the girl has—but she implores him to help her and her daughter. If Achilles does not defend them, Clytemnestra fears, all will be lost.

Clytemnestra knows that as a woman, she cannot do anything to save her daughter. She must rely on a man to influence fate for them both, and since Agamemnon is ready to turn Iphigeneia over to the sacrificial altar, Clytemnestra knows that the powerful and influential Achilles is her last hope.

Achilles begins a speech: he declares that though he is full of anger, he has learned "to curb [his] grief in adversity." He promises to help Clytemnestra—he will not let Iphigeneia be slaughtered by her father. If Iphigeneia were to die now, Achilles says, his "own body would be defiled" as well. He swears on his lineage that he will not let Agamemnon touch Iphigeneia. He condemns the king for using his name to lure an innocent girl into a "snare." Achilles ends his speech by stating that although he is not "some great god," he will do his best to become one in order to protect both Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia. The chorus of Chalkidian women praises Achilles for his bravery.

In this passage, Achilles proves himself to be different than the other men in the play. He's not obsessed with his own fate or his entrapment within it; he's able to control his emotions; and he empathizes with the fate of a woman he's never even met rather than seeing her, as all the other men do, as a sacrificial object.

Clytemnestra thanks Achilles for his loyalty and kindness. She admits that while she is ashamed to concern him with her own sufferings, she knows the seriousness of her plight "deserves" his attention. She offers to bring forth Iphigeneia so that the girl might supplicate herself before Achilles and beg his help. Achilles, though, replies that Clytemnestra should let Iphigeneia remain "ignorant" of the terrible betrayal that's been done unto her. Achilles doesn't need Iphigeneia's supplication to commit himself to her cause, he says—he is already committed and he pledges his hope that he will "live only if she does."

Achilles believes that learning the truth about what her father has planned for her will only hurt Iphigeneia, and that since there's a chance Agamemnon might yet be talked out of his stance, Iphigeneia should be spared learning of her father's betrayal for the time being. He clearly wants to preserve whatever familial relationships these people have left, though they are clearly in tatters.

Achilles tells Clytemnestra he has a plan. He suggests she go to Agamemnon herself, tell him she's learned of his plot, and beg him to spare Iphigeneia—Clytemnestra may be able to persuade Agamemnon with her own words. If Agamemnon refuses her, Achilles says, then she can come to him for help. He promises not to stray far from the tent so that Clytemnestra won't need to humiliate herself by wandering through the camp full of men looking for him should she need his assistance. Clytemnestra agrees to the plan and retreats into the tent. The old man follows her. Achilles exits, hiding himself nearby.

Achilles is hopeful that Agamemnon can still be brought to reason by the persuasion of his loving wife. This belief reflects Achilles's faith in the man's power to make rational decisions on his own behalf—but Achilles, having never met Agamemnon, clearly underestimates the man's fear of the gods and willingness to surrender to the forces he believes to be "destiny."

The chorus of Chalkidian women enters and sings a song telling the story of the blessed, joyful marriage of Achilles's parents and a prophecy made by a herd of centaurs that the son they'd bear together would be "a light and a splendor" who would one day sail across the sea in golden armor to sack Troy. The chorus laments that Iphigeneia's fate is not as illustrious as her would-be husband's: her fate is to be marched to the sacrificial altar like a "spotted heifer." The chorus cries that blasphemy has come to power and "men have put justice behind them."

The chorus clearly adores Achilles for his goodness and rationality—he embodies the values of levelheadedness and empathy that are actually important rather than the false sense of pride that the other men in the play seem to embody. However, the chorus still laments that women are treated so badly in their world—they see men as responsible for the lapses in "justice" that allow innocent girls like Iphigeneia to suffer such terrible fates.

Clytemnestra comes out from the tent and declares that she cannot find her husband. Iphigeneia has learned of Agamemnon's plans for her and cannot stop sobbing. Clytemnestra prays that her husband will return soon so that he can "stand convicted" of plotting his own daughter's death. Right at that moment, Agamemnon enters and asks for Clytemnestra to call out for Iphigeneia—it is nearly time for the sacrifice that will sanctify her marriage. He is still unaware that Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia have discovered his plot. Clytemnestra decides to play along. She calls for Iphigeneia to come out of the tent with the baby Orestes swaddled in her arms. Iphigeneia comes outside, crying and hiding her face from her father with her robe.

Clytemnestra likely told Iphigeneia the truth in spite of Achilles's request for her to let the girl live in ignorance a while longer. This demonstrates that Clytemnestra is not willing to put her fate or her daughter's in the hands of the men around them, even those who are well-intentioned.

Agamemnon asks Iphigeneia why she is crying and obscuring herself from his gaze. Clytemnestra steps forward to explain but then she declares that she "cannot think where to start [her] bitter story" as it is composed entirely of grief. She begs Agamemnon for his honesty. He promises to give it to her. Clytemnestra asks if Agamemnon intends to kill Iphigeneia. Agamemnon accuses his wife of "vile suspicion." She points out that he hasn't provided an answer. Agamemnon says he will not answer such an unreasonable question, but Clytemnestra keeps urging him to confess. When Agamemnon still refuses, she tells him that she already knows the whole story and that his "silence itself is a confession."

Even when confronted directly by his family, Agamemnon is unable to even do them the courtesy of telling them the truth about what he's done. He is clearly humiliated by his own actions—but his own sadness obviously doesn't compare to the larger humiliation he fears Greece will face at the hands of Troy if Agamemnon doesn't submit to his brother's cause.

Clytemnestra rails against Agamemnon. She reminds him that he killed her first husband, Tantalos, and the child they had together in order to marry her himself. In spite of the bloody, terrible beginning of their relationship, Clytemnestra has loved Agamemnon and has given him many children—and now, she proclaims, he has the audacity to murder one of them for the sake of his brother's marriage to a "worthless woman." Clytemnestra warns Agamemnon that if he kills Iphigeneia, sails away to war, and then returns home to kiss their remaining children and pretend like nothing has happened, she will turn against him forever. Clytemnestra ends her speech by begging Agamemnon to "be wise" and "turn back" from making a decision that will tear them apart forever. The chorus of Chalkidian women speaks up to back Clytemnestra's entreaty and Agamemnon to heed his wife.

As Clytemnestra delves into the history of her relationship with Agamemnon, it becomes clear that their past is far from perfect. Agamemnon essentially stole Clytemnestra from her old life and committed terrible crimes against her. In spite of it all, she adapted to the role of loving wife—and she is now being repaid by having yet another of her children ripped from her and killed for reasons she doesn't understand or respect. Clytemnestra is even willing to give her husband the benefit of the doubt and assume he's done the terrible things he's done because he feels helpless not to—she reminds him now that he is the master of his own destiny in an attempt reason with him.

Iphigeneia steps forward, hands Orestes to her mother, and then stoops before Agamemnon and grabs his knees. She says that although she is not a gifted speaker who has the "tongue of Orpheus," she hopes that her tears will persuade her father not to send her to her death. She reminds Agamemnon that she is his first child and she has always been an adoring "suppliant" to him. Iphigeneia has nothing to do with the strife Paris and Helen have caused and she should not have to die because of their folly. She ends her speech by asking her father to kiss her, at least, if he won't answer or absolve her, so that she can remember the feeling as she dies. Agamemnon stoops to kiss her.

Iphigeneia, like Clytemnestra, attempts to appeal to her Agamemnon's sympathies by reminding him how loyal she is to him and how much she loves him. Iphigeneia's loyalty is to the family she has, but her father's loyalty is, unfortunately, to the legacy and lineage he has inherited rather than the people standing right before him.

Iphigeneia then takes Orestes back from Clytemnestra and presents him to Agamemnon, begging the child to cry. She hopes that with his tears, he might move Agamemnon to take pity on her and respect both his children's lives. She then hands Orestes back to Clytemnestra and she gives Agamemnon the chance to answer her.

Iphigeneia holds Orestes up to Agamemnon perhaps in hopes that she can remind him of the future of his house—not just the glory of its past.

Agamemnon laments that although he loves his children, he is "forced" to sacrifice Iphigeneia. All the armies of Greece are assembled and waiting to sail for Troy—but there is something deeper in their urgency. Agamemnon states that Aphrodite, the goddess of love, has moved the men of Greece to a frenzy. If he interferes with Aphrodite's plans, he says, she will surely influence the army to round on Agamemnon and kill him and his family anyway. Agamemnon insists he's not guided by Menelaos, but by the spirit of Greece itself. As a Greek man, Agamemnon cannot stand for a Trojan carrying off a Greek's wife. He exits solemnly.

This passage represents the very real fear of the gods' wrath that many Ancient Greeks felt. Even powerful kings like Agamemnon, Euripides argues, are insignificant to the gods of Olympus and they feel that they're unable to control their own destinies. Even if Agamemnon makes choices on his own behalf, he fears that the gods will intervene to make sure that their will is done.

Clytemnestra angrily chastises her husband for running away from the daughter he has decided to give up to Hades, god of the underworld. Iphigeneia laments that she must "say good-bye to the light" and travel to the kingdom of the dead. She laments that Paris was ever born and curses Helen—both of them have condemned her to "fall to [her] ungodly father's ungodly knife." Iphigeneia continues her rant, railing against the very existence of Aulis, the fickle nature of the winds, and the cruel role of destiny. The chorus of Chalkidian women speaks up and tells Iphigeneia that she does not deserve the fate she's soon to meet.

Iphigeneia is furious in this passage—she doesn't understand why she has to suffer for the mistakes of others. Like her father, she feels trapped by fate and destiny and tricked cruelly by the gods themselves. Her fury borders on humiliation—a fact which sets up the idea that for Iphigeneia, the only way to save face and salvage the situation is to accept the role others have assigned to her and embody it fully, reframing her understanding of what her part in the Trojan War is.

Iphigeneia calls out: she can see a group of men approaching. Clytemnestra looks into the distance and sees Achilles drawing near. Iphigeneia tries to hurry inside. When Clytemnestra asks Iphigeneia why she's trying to hide, Iphigeneia says she's embarrassed to meet the man she believed she'd marry. Clytemnestra, however, insists that now is "no time […] for delicacy." Achilles, she tells Iphigeneia, is their last hope.

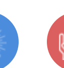
Iphigeneia wants to flee from all that's happening to her, but her mother insists that there's no need to be humiliated—it's the behavior of the men around them that is wrong.

Achilles enters with several armed attendants. The sound of shouting can be heard offstage, and Achilles reports that the armies are calling for Iphigeneia's sacrifice and Achilles's own death for his part in trying to save her. Clytemnestra is scandalized to learn that the Greeks would've rebelled against one of their proudest soldiers, but Achilles states that his own army was the first men to turn against him when he declared that he would not allow his "bride" to be killed. Clytemnestra laments that all is lost.

This passage confronts the roles women are forced to play in a world run by men: women must do whatever the men around them believe they should or else be threatened with death. Iphigeneia is resisting what the men believe her fate should be, so now they're calling for her death out of vengeance rather than a somber fealty to Artemis.

As the shouting draws nearer, Achilles staunchly promises to protect Clytemnestra and Iphigeneia to his last breath—even if thousands of men, led by the powerful Odysseus, come to drag Iphigeneia away by her hair. Iphigeneia, however, steps forward and speaks to both her mother and Achilles. She declares that there is no use in fighting, or in Achilles or Clytemnestra—or both of them—giving their lives for her. She sees no use in "hold[ing] out against the inevitable"—she has decided to die in glory. Iphigeneia explains that "all the people […] of Greece" now turn to her for salvation—the outcome of the Trojan War depends solely on her. She can win the war for Greece by offering up her life and she no longer sees any sense in standing in the way of Greece's freedom.

Achilles, Clytemnestra, and Iphigeneia all know that even if she resists going to her death, the men of the Greek army will kill her themselves. It is perhaps because of this that Iphigeneia decides to surrender to her fate—even if being sacrificed has only become her destiny through the actions of others, such as her father. Iphigeneia chooses to reframe the situation in her mind as an opportunity for glory, pride, and honor on her name, her house, and her country rather than what it actually is: a group of men calling for an innocent young woman's death.



The chorus of Chalkidian women congratulates Iphigeneia on her "noble" decision in the face of a "sick" destiny and a terrible command from the goddess Artemis.

The chorus admits that destiny rules the world of men, but they admires Iphigeneia for gracefully accepting rather than resisting the cruelty of this fact.

Achilles steps forward and addresses Iphigeneia. He says that he'd be lucky to have her for a wife but he knows that she belongs to Greece. Still, he makes one last plea for her to resist fate, resist the gods, and agree to return home with him as his bride. Iphigeneia, though, states that her mind is made up. She doesn't want Achilles to fight or die for her—all she wants now is to save Greece. Achilles applauds Iphigeneia's courage and assures her that he will accompany her to the altar. If she should change her mind, he will be ready to intervene on her behalf and stay by her side until the final second of her life. He bids her goodbye and he heads for the temple.

Achilles so admires Iphigeneia's bravery, it seems, that he has fallen in love with her and wants to make her his true bride. Iphigeneia, however, is determined to turn her situation into something useful. She knows that in a world of men, there are only so many roles she can play; perhaps she would rather be an object of glory and reverence than simply a wife.

Iphigeneia turns to the weeping Clytemnestra, begging her not to shed any more tears. She asks her mother for a favor. Clytemnestra replies that she will do anything for her daughter, and Iphigeneia begs her mother not to mourn her after she is dead. Instead, she wants Clytemnestra to recognize that they have been "blessed by fortune"—Iphigeneia alone can bring salvation to Greece.

Iphigeneia has decided to see herself not as a pitiful sacrifice, but as one who has been chosen by the gods to deliver her people. In this way, Iphigeneia is taking her fate into her own hands and reclaiming agency over her situation. Whether her ideas about attaining glory for her family and her country are true or false, she's made a choice—which is more than many of the other characters in the play have done.

Clytemnestra hands Orestes to Iphigeneia and tells her to say goodbye to her brother. Iphigeneia embraces the baby. Clytemnestra asks if there is anything she can do back in Argos on Iphigeneia's behalf. Iphigeneia asks only that her mother not grow to hate Agamemnon—she points out that what he does now he does against his will. Clytemnestra, however, suggests that Agamemnon will face an unhappy lot because of what he is doing to Iphigeneia.

Iphigeneia proves that she is truly good by begging her mother not to harbor any anger toward her father. Her mother's response, however, foreshadows the events of Aeschylus's The Oresteia, *a series of plays in which Clytemnestra's thirst for revenge against Agamemnon poisons their family's entire house.*

Clytemnestra offers to lead Iphigeneia to the altar, but Iphigeneia insists Clytemnestra stay behind—she would rather one of her father's bring her up. She calls forth an attendant. Clytemnestra begs Iphigeneia not to leave, but Iphigeneia reminds her mother not to protest or cry. Iphigeneia turns to the chorus and asks them to join her in a hymn to Artemis which will "celebrate [her] fate."

Iphigeneia has been railing against this moment for so long—but now that it is here, she decides to stoically and solitarily go forth into what she believes is glory. She's not angry with Artemis for demanding her life—instead, she wants to glorify the goddess and thank her for the opportunity to bring honor to Greece.

Iphigeneia begins singing a "triumphant lament" about how she will be the one to conquer Troy. She blesses Artemis and says she is looking forward to "wash[ing] away with [her] own blood" the conflict between Greece and Troy. Iphigeneia sings praises to Aulis and to her home of Mycenae and then she states that she is looking forward to her journey to a new home. She exits with her attendant. Clytemnestra, carrying Orestes, goes into Agamemnon's tent.

Iphigeneia has decided to use her unfortunate lot in life to bring glory not only to Greece, but to her family and to her own name. Clytemnestra's solemn retreat into her tent reflects, perhaps, Euripides's own narrative suspicion of such paeans to the glory of uncaring gods and corrupt leadership.

The chorus sings wistfully about Iphigeneia's solemn but purposeful march to the sacrificial altar. They describe the beautiful garlands that will adorn her body and her "lovely throat" which will soon be cut by her father's own hand. The women raise their voices up to Artemis, begging the goddess to be pleased enough by this sacrifice to let the armies of Greece sail to Troy—and to Agamemnon's victory.

The chorus uses romantic, fawning terms to describe the bloody sacrifice about to unfold. They have the same reverent ideas about glory and pride that Iphigeneia has either come to embody or forced herself to believe.

A messenger enters and calls for Clytemnestra to come out and receive a message. Clytemnestra exits the tent, carrying Orestes and "shaking with terror" at the idea of a message carrying even more grief. The messenger, however, declares that he has "miraculous" news about Iphigeneia. The messenger begins telling the story of Iphigeneia's march to the sacred altar: when Agamemnon saw her approach, he groaned and cried, but Iphigeneia approached him gently and gave herself willingly to him. The rallied troops "marveled" at her bravery and the ritual began. As Kalchas took up the knife and brought it down to Iphigeneia's throat, however, a miracle took place—Iphigeneia vanished.

Clytemnestra doesn't know how much more misery she can take. The messenger begins describing a "miracle" in which Iphigeneia comes to great glory—but for Clytemnestra, who has always placed family and duty before pride and glory, the miraculous happenstance doesn't carry any real weight.

The messenger reports that in Iphigeneia's place, there was suddenly a gasping and bleeding **deer**—the animal associated with Artemis, goddess of the moon and the hunt. Kalchas decreed the miracle a blessing from Artemis herself and he declared the winds high enough to sail upon. The messenger reports that Iphigeneia has been "taken up into heaven," and thus Clytemnestra's grief should be quieted and her hatred of her husband should come to an end. The chorus of Chalkidian women joyously celebrates that Iphigeneia is not dead in the underworld, but alive and in heaven with the gods. Clytemnestra, however, isn't certain whether she should believe the messenger's tale.

Artemis replacing Iphigeneia with a deer, the animal most sacred to her, demonstrates her satisfaction with the sacrifice and her ability to see Iphigeneia as someone beloved and revered. This ending is a classic deus ex machina, *in which an impossible situation is solved by a hasty, unlikely intervention by the gods themselves. Clytemnestra is unsatisfied with such an ending—she doesn't have her daughter back, and her husband is going to get away with having betrayed them both.*

Agamemnon approaches, surrounded by generals, priests, soldiers, and sailors—all of whom are ready to sail for Troy at last. Agamemnon confirms the messenger's tale and bids Clytemnestra return home with Orestes. He promises to write her from Troy but warns her that the journey may yet be a long one. The chorus calls out to bless Agamemnon's journey across the sea. Agamemnon and his coterie depart. Clytemnestra, carrying Orestes, heads into her husband's tent without looking back.

The ending of the play appears, at first glance, neat and simple—however, Euripides foreshadows Clytemnestra's lingering anger over having lost her daughter (and her fear of losing her infant son Orestes). He ends the play not by following Agamemnon and his triumphant procession down to the harbor, but with a final glance at a fearful, isolated woman who has given the ultimate sacrifice and yet is forced to remain alone on the fringes of society.

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