

What about Iphigenia? Divine Presence and the Story World

Modern readers of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, when considering the conspicuous absence of Iphigenia's sacrifice at moments such as the 'opening statement' of Orestes and the Furies' arguments in the *Eumenides*, are likely to ask themselves: "What about Iphigenia?" This is especially probable if readers recall that, at the beginning of the *Agamemnon*, the chorus rather gruesomely recounts the events leading up to Iphigenia's sacrifice by her father. This paper contends that ancient audiences, too, might have felt the absence of Iphigenia in this and similar moments throughout the *Oresteia*.

Using the concept of 'haunting the narrative,' a phrase used in online fandom spaces to discuss characters who, although dead, exert influence on the narrative or are otherwise 'felt' despite their absence, I explore the palpable absences of Iphigenia throughout the *Oresteia* and consider the effects this might have had on an ancient audience. First, this paper argues that this kind of participation by the audience—reading Iphigenia into moments where she is not explicitly mentioned—is related to the concept of the 'mythic story world' (Johnston 2009) and thus strengthens the believability of not just the myth at hand but the entire mythic network. The second effect is that the audience, as a result of thinking of Iphigenia despite her explicit absence, could have felt the 'real' or 'physical' presence of Iphigenia the heroine, who received hero cult (Kearns 1989).

Ultimately, this trope—'haunting the narrative'—is not useful for its own sake. That is, this paper is not concerned with identifying every single instance in which Iphigenia might haunt the narrative in these and other tragedies; rather, I argue that this trope is a particularly helpful metaphor to think about the relationship between myth, performance, and divine presence. Given

the intrinsic ties between myth, poetics, and performance in ancient Greece (Calame 2009) as well as the context of many performances in the ancient world—tragedies, for example, were performed during a religious festival—exploring the effects of performances of mythic narratives is a fruitful avenue for understanding how people in the ancient world could have interacted with and conceived of the divine.

Bibliography

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