

Athenian Patriotism in Two Acts: *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Plato's *Menexenus*

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. Who comes to mind? Horace or Wilfred Owen? Or maybe Charles Mee, who quotes Owen quoting Horace in his *Iphigenia 2.0* (p. 57)? And since Horace 3.2 was quoting the sentiment, if not the words, of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Mee takes us full circle, in a way, back to the source.

In this paper I consider the question of patriotism and irony in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Is Euripides expressing enthusiasm for Panhellenism and a renewed spirit of Athenian patriotism, disgust with a meaningless and never-ending war, or something entirely different? Closely related to that is the whole constellation of questions about the character of Iphigenia in the play, and what to make of her sudden willingness to die for Greece. Is Iphigenia a dupe to be pitied, an innocent child grasping at some sort of meaning in a world gone mad, an inspirational example of nobility and selfless patriotism, or too poorly drawn for us to say? The long list of those who have considered those questions, starting with Aristotle (*Poetics* 1454a31), attests both to their importance and to the impossibility of our ever answering them to the satisfaction of all. Wilfred Owen and Charles Mee, responding to the political and military atrocities of the past century, take the less optimistic view about patriotic statements. Living in the 21st century, surrounded by so many and such varied atrocities, is it possible *not* to read *Iphigenia at Aulis* as an exercise in irony? Apparently so: most of my students (less jaded by the shocks of the late 20th/early 21st century?) and, maybe more to the point, some scholars still find patriotic nobility, not just in the character of Iphigenia, but in Euripides' tragic vision (Markantonatos).

It is customary to address these questions, and to try to suppress the influence of

our own age, by focusing on the particulars of the text and on the more general ethos of Euripides' corpus. I'll do that in this paper, but only briefly, outlining in the broadest strokes some of the central arguments made on both sides. From the text we can argue that Iphigenia is just rehashing Agamemnon's discredited view, or that she (unlike Agamemnon) truly understands panhellenism; that no one in this play can take a stand for more than five minutes, or that she alone holds firm, thereby calling attention to the inconstancy of all others; and so on. From the corpus, we can compare other versions of self-sacrifice, other so-called statements about war and suffering, other apparent references to Athens, and decide that Euripides is an Athenian patriot; or not.

I'd like to approach from a different, less direct angle, one that might give us insight more generally into the literary treatment of patriotism at the time. For that I turn to another public genre that, on its face, is explicitly patriotic and pro-Athenian: the funeral oration. Readers of *IA* have often looked to the *epitaphioi* as clear manifestations – and thereby supporting examples – of the sentiments in Iphigenia's speech: the nobility of self-sacrifice for Athens/Greece, the uniqueness of the culture of Athens/Greece, the eternal fame (as opposed to quotidian oblivion) to be gained from death in service to Athens/Greece, and so on. But reference to the funeral oration can cut both ways, and I'll look at one example of the genre that suggests possibilities for irony even in the praise of the war dead: Plato's *Menexenus*. The *epitaphios* in that dialogue, according to Cicero (*Orat.* 151), was so revered by the Greeks that it was read annually to commemorate war dead. More recent readers have a different opinion, seeing it rather as a masterful pastiche of every formula in the *epitaphios*, all adding up (in the view of many) to an indictment of Athenian self-delusion about its political and military incompetence.

I'll spend some time supporting that latter view, and then consider what we might conclude from a juxtaposition of these two presumably patriotic texts. The darkest conclusion might be that at least two Athenians (and presumably some members of their audiences) were so disillusioned with the state of their state that they resorted to the sort of irony that tears down without adding anything positive. A more nuanced view might find glimmers of hope in the midst of the irony, an attack that identifies problems and might even offer solutions.

Bibliography

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[With helpful bibliography.]

Mee, Charles. 2007. *Iphigenia 2.0*. Charlesmee.org.